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Cease Fire: One Woman's Search for Self in a Culture of War

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

By

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Abstract

Cease Fire is a war story told from one woman's perspective. It's about a farm girl and her battles fought as young soldier serving on a remote nuke site during the Cold War. It's the interpretations of lived experiences, highs and lows of a military career fused with family life, and spanning over three decades. Like true war stories, *Cease Fire* has little to do with actual war. It is a sometimes humorous, but often tragic attempt to make peace and to make sense of the places, comrades and enemies that graced and plagued a career.

First names and nicknames were used to protect the privacy of a few and render respect for the surviving children of a fallen two.

Women in the military; Army; Coast Guard; Post traumatic stress disorder; Meniere's Disease; Military sexual trauma; sexual harassment; woman warrior

Chapter 1: Accidental Soldier

“And in the end, of course, a true war story is never about war. It's about sunlight. It's about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. It's about love and memory. It's about sorrow. It's about sisters who never write back and people who never listen.”

— Tim O'Brien

I accidentally joined the Army. Sounds ridiculous, I know. There's no way to slip, trip, and slide into the military, but that's how I remember the whole thing going down.

It was 1985, and concerns over the endangered spotted owl threatened livelihoods of Oregon loggers and slowed timber harvesting to a near standstill. Local sawmills closed, again. Folks from my logging town often struggled with depression, but the gouge seemed deeper that year, personal.

I was a senior in high school with no plans. School guidance counselors wasted no time on girls like me, farm girls with uneducated parents and insufficient funds. Oh, I'm sure my last name drifted across desks, and I received a pause, a double-take. It was a common name. My parents and grandparents attended the same school in a town where family name seals fate. I imagine the school counselor rubbing his stubble, “Ah yes, the little Wettlaufer girl, smart kid, ornery but pretty. She'll make someone a suitable wife. Such a pity...”

I dreamed of escape, escape from an unwanted destiny of teen pregnancy followed by a hasty wedding, and a life as a logger's wife stuck in Molalla, Oregon. I imagined an ugly future, probably the same image seen by my educators.

I'd like to tell you how patriotic I felt, how the desire to serve pumped in my blood, how if you cut me, I'd bleed Army green. These are lies for another occasion. I don't recall giving

consideration to enlistment, to my future as a soldier. Instead, I contemplated reasons not to enlist. There were few.

Military recruiters feed on depressed towns like Molalla, places where money and dreams are tight. The high school offered the Armed Forces Vocational Aptitude Battery or ASVAB, proctored by service men. I didn't plan to take the test, had not entertained the notion of military service, but like a bird attracted to shiny objects, I admired the uniforms and the recruiters wearing them. Sparkly insignias, badges, and awards lured me into the testing room. Hypnotized, I eyed men of the Army, Navy, and Marines – three different services, three different ethnicities, none Caucasian. The men seemed exotic. Molalla was nearly homogeneous at the time. There were one or two Hispanic families, but everyone else pretty much looked the same. I struggled to imagine a life of diversity, a life far from my family, and an actual future. With test booklet and number-two pencils in hand, I stumbled into action, irreversible change, a way out.

A month later, a recruiter called wanting to talk about test scores. I agreed to meet at school during lunch, but only if he picked up food at Taco Time. I loved mexi-fries, tater-tots sprinkled with zesty seasonings. He bought me a TaB, a soft taco, and a large order of tots. We sat across a round table in the corner. I tried appearing aloof, but I gushed on the inside from the personal attention of a lunch meeting with someone important.

I waved a hand across the test results. "So, what does this crap mean?"

"Young lady, it means you can be all you can be. You can be a military police woman in the United States Army."

He had me at the first "you can be"

I shipped off to Fort McClellan, Alabama on the 29th of October, 1985. The goal was to survive eight weeks of Army boot camp and an additional nine weeks of Military Police Academy.

The first week was a blur, but I remember standing outside the armory, listening to rifles crack into opened palms. Girls of Alpha-11 received issue. A big deal damn deal, a coming of age, the macabre communion uniting soul with steel, I wanted no part.

I never wanted a rifle, never wanted to kill. For three hots and a cot, the New GI Bill, and a one way ticket out of No-where-ville, I raised my right hand, swore to defend, signed my name, sold my ass, but not my heart. I'd wear the camouflage, march the cadence, and mark time. I'd never buckle to brainwashing, and never fall for that, *Be All You Can Be*, Army bullshit.

I rolled my eyes as Connors, Janc, Vegas, and Little Rivera lifted M16 automatics overhead, barking out, *hard core, hoo-ah, psycho, airborne, and kill a commie for your mommy*. Soft peachy faces contorted in anger. I planned to throw out a little "woo-hoo," to keep the drill sergeants off my ass. A polite yelp, and nothing more.

The girls with rifles huddled, hugging an ugliness I refused to embrace. I thought about Dad's words, that nasty comment, "Goddammit, kid. There are only three kinds of girls in the military: Sluts, dykes, and women far too ugly to catch a man."

"Who am I?" I wondered. Clobbie shoved me from behind, pushing me on before I formulated an answer. I stood with feet apart, hands spread wide, ready to catch a football. I heard the metallic clank, felt the clap and sting of smooth butt-stock and cool hand-grips meeting warm skin. Nostrils flared with gunpowder. Teeth clamped. I tasted blood. Electric jolts pulsed through rigid muscle. Thrusting the weapon skyward, I released, "Kill, kill, kill."

Shocked, I leaked a nervous laugh. Thrilled but terrified, I caught a glimpse of unfiltered truth. Behind the gun, identity pierced the skin.

I joined the huddle of girls, my platoon. Ears rang with the dry scrapes and metallic clinks of charging handles pulled to the rear and bolts released, the tinny clips of dust covers closing, and hands, so many hands, with rings and fingernails clicking in exploration along barrels and bodies of blackened steel, and the tattletale clack of a dropped weapon, mine.

A hush fell over the armory. A blanket of fear suffocated sound except for a haunting “ooh.”

“Get down with it,” bellowed a Drill Sergeant. A dropped weapon paralleled serious crime, like shaking a baby. “Give me twenty.”

Twenty push-ups and no public humiliation? I breathed premature relief but realized the trap, the sneaky trick. The drill sergeant didn’t see who dropped the weapon and wouldn’t know until I dropped and counted off the repetitions of punishment. Not one to shy from an ass kicking, I dropped anyway. The girls dropped too. Our bodies formed rigid planks. Weapons balanced across our knuckles. We pushed out twenty, and our voices sounded off in unison. My sisters-in-arms camouflaged the fault of one. I no longer felt alone. I joined the Army, a gun club of sluts, dykes, and women far too ugly to catch a man.

During the second week of training, Drill Sergeant Lowry hollered out, “Private Betty Boop.” I knew he meant me. At first, he attempted to pronounce my real name, stumbling over the name tape on my uniform. Its phonetic, not all that tough, but the ten letters scrolled across my chest flustered him. I was Private Alphabet during the first few days of training, but a

lanky girl with a jagged smile and Jersey accent competed for the title. Private Poronczuk became Private Alphabet.

By week four, I mastered the basics of rifle-bayonet training and poked at platoon mates with giant Q-tips called *pugil sticks*. Void of fear, fighting seemed irrational, like wasted energy. Big Mertz, my nemesis, called me out, picking a fight. Mertz appeared tougher than she was. She stood five inches taller and weighed forty to fifty pounds more than most of us.

We almost hated each other. She came out swinging. I blocked, ducked, and landed blows. Her movements looked robotic, by the numbers, plucked straight from the Soldiers Manual. Mertz was textbook, except she never connected. I fought from a place of fear, not the Soldiers Manual. I threw a crazed butt stroke and thrust combo. I nailed her Adam's apple. Big Mertz fell hard. I kicked her ass, but it wasn't the end to our problems.

Besides shooting, fighting remained my only real soldier skill. I marched off beat with two left feet. Military bearing, uniform, and hair standards seemed lost causes. I even failed at bed making, those impossible hospital corners, and the expected tautness required for bouncing a coin. To add to the shortcomings my nickname, Betty Boop, set me up for failure. I wanted a name like Psycho, or Killer, something tough.

Even though I never lost a fight, my pugil stick form was a joke. I hit hard and fast, holding my center of gravity low, advancing forward, and never retreating. I saved my bastardized butt stroke and thrust combo for tough customers. Most opponents dropped with a solid thwack to the headgear. Drill Sergeant Lowry watched me from a distance before calling me over.

I smoothed dark hair tousled from gear and tugged at wrinkles in my uniform. I patted myself down from chest to cargo pockets, checking and securing wayward buttons and brushing sand from scuffed boots. I drew a breath and moved out.

He wore his Smokey-Bear hat low, casting a shadow down to a black moustache. Arms crossed at his chest. Rolled sleeves exposed forearms poured from dark chocolate. Like a life size G.I. Joe, I imagined he smelled of new dolly vinyl.

I stood at *parade rest*, feet shoulder width apart, legs straight, knees bent, hands stacked in the small of my back, right thumb over left, chest uplifted, head and eyes forward, and mouth shut. He stepped closer, too close. I saw nothing but the top of his brown tee-shirt peeking from starched camouflage. I sniffed him, inhaling warm spices and vanilla, kind of like pumpkin pie, not like G.I. Joe. I gasped. He leaned forward and whispered. "Good fighting, Private Boop." His breath tickled my ear. I imagined his moustache against my cheek. My face burned.

"You ain't no ghetto girl. Where you get that anger?"

I choked on air, searching to find a voice, but said nothing. I held no anger, just relief.

He stepped back to let me breathe. His mustache danced. He fought for control, but a smile broke away. I caught his smile. He shouted. "Get out of my face, *Soldier!*"

I sprinted back to my platoon, my sisters-in-arms to brag. "Hey, he called me a *Soldier.*"

I repeated his statement over in my head, each time emphasizing the last word. Soldier. It was just a word, spoken in the right tone and at the right time.

I got along well with most girls of Alpha-11, but my heart held a separate place for Little Rivera, our youngest member. She came from New Mexico and spoke English as a second

language. Consequently, she didn't speak much at all. She was too young to enlist in the Army without parental consent. She seemed too sheltered to have been raised by parents who gave such consent. I imagined her falsely interpreting enlistment documents to her Spanish speaking parents for her non-Spanish speaking recruiter. I believe she tricked them all. Like me, Little Rivera ran away from home.

Rivera kept to herself during the day but perked up after hours. She volunteered to pull late-night fire guard duty with me. We sat together and told stories. She practiced English pronunciations. I taught her to swear. She shared photos of her family kept in a little album hidden in her cargo pocket. I loved the tattered photo of her baby brother. In a backdrop of dust, trash, and haggard dogs stood a toddler dressed in patched overalls. Toffee brown, shirtless, and shoeless, he wore a toothless smile. A wide-brimmed straw hat rested on his head. A chicken perched on the crown of the straw hat. I made her show me the photo whenever we were alone. Photos, like chocolate and soda pop, were contraband. Sharing of Contraband solidified friendships.

I was not the best influence on Little Rivera. One night while pulling guard duty, I craved soda pop in the worst way. Armed with ax handles, thirty-five cents, and too much courage, we crept downstairs to find the sergeant's lounge. We fumbled in the dark, led by the faint glow of the Coke machine.

Rivera's soft peach of a face hardened. She soldiered-up and acted like a true operator. Low crawling to the machine, she got into position and signaled me to move. I slithered into place. She kept her belly to the floor and raised her arms and inserted her hands into the machine's metallic womb. I inserted a quarter heavily lubricated with a coat of spit. The spit

worked as planned, cushioning the metal on metal tinkling as the quarter moved through the maze and ended with an almost inaudible plunk. I slobbered up the dime and repeated. Perfect. The machine hummed. A green light appeared. We exchanged nods, and I pressed the TaB button. Little Rivera braced herself for the delivery. We waited. I bit my lower lip. Rivera remained focused on the womb. I listened to the soft plop. My mouth watered. She had our baby. She stuffed the ice-cold TaB in her cargo pocket, and we scrambled back upstairs.

Safely in our barracks, we cruised up and down the rows of bunks ensuring comrades slept. With another hour before scheduled to wake my replacement, Rivera and I huddled in a bathroom stall. She sat backwards on the toilet seat facing me, and I balanced on the pipe-works above her. I imagined us as high school friends sneaking a cigarette break in the girls' bathroom.

She pulled the can from her pants. "Go ahead," I said.

"No. You do. I scared," she said. The can, with tiny crystals of promising dew, glistened. I pressed it to my forehead and sighed. I hooked my finger under the aluminum lever and gently pried. Psssst. Fizz overflowed. We giggled, covering our mouths and allowing the foam to flow between her legs and into the toilet bowl.

I passed the can, offering Rivera the first drink. She gasped as the TaB bubbles rushed down her throat and tickled up her nose. Like a greedy baby wanting a sippy-cup, I clapped my hands in anticipation.

Little Rivera held up her index finger, signaling a toast or something of importance to say. She burped, "Christine." She burped my name, not my stupid nickname, not my last name, but my first name. I hadn't heard my name in so long. I forgot all about the pop for a moment.

“What’s your name?”

“Chanda.”

“Chanda.” I repeated her name as if we met for the first time. “Chanda Rivera. How beautiful.” And she was. Something strange rushed over me, an emotion that was hard to pinpoint. I sipped the TaB and observed for the first time, the immaculate perfection of Chanda Rivera. I watched her as we passed the can back and forth. My insides wound up like a cheap wristwatch. Huddled inside a toilet stall, I sensed a romantic excitement. It was like a date. Confused and thrilled at the same time, I leaned in to her. Chanda leaned into me and rested her forehead on my chest. I loved Chanda Rivera.

We shared the moment’s intimacy and the rest of the soda pop. Overwhelmed by emotion and distracted by the foreign concept of loving another woman, I tossed the empty can in the trash and walked out into the open bay. In a daze, I woke my fire-guard replacement, Big Mertz.

Big Mertz found the soda can, and of course she turned it in to the drill sergeant, and of course Drill Sergeant Lowry held an empty pink TaB can as we filed into morning formation. Before he even inquired, Chanda’s sweet voice called out, “Drill Sergeant, Private Rivera request permission to speak.”

“Speak Rivera.”

“Drill Sergeant, dat my can.”

He appeared surprised. “Private, are you sure?”

Holy crap, I hated what I had to do. “Drill Sergeant, Private Boop requests permission to speak.”

“Well, well. Private Betty Boop, I might have guessed this is your can.”

“Yes, Drill Sergeant, Little Rivera is confused.”

“Oh, I see. One of you is confused. One of you is a soda pop bandit.”

“Yes, Drill Sergeant.”

“Fine. I’ll nuke you both. Nuke you till you glow. Tonight. Eighteen-hundred hours. Drill sergeant’s lounge, front of the soda machine.”

Chanda and I reported to the pop machine as ordered and spent the next four hours performing cardio exercises at heart-attack pace. Getting smoked, nuked, and having our asses kicked. We sweated our lady-balls off. Drill Sergeant Lowry called out the exercise rotations and sang along to a never-ending loop of Prince’s *Kiss*.

Paperwork waited on a table near the pop machine. All we had to do was quit – quit and go home. Sign the paperwork and be free. Dishonorably discharged as soda-pop thieves.

I thought about Chanda’s little brother, the chicken on his head, and the backyard full of trash. We performed jumping-jacks while her beautiful face blotched purple with exhaustion. We dropped to the floor, preparing for flutter kicks when she spoke up, “Drill Sergeant, all dis for just one calorie?” I busted out laughing and rolled onto my side.

Chanda, a girl of lean muscle mass and no visible fat, somehow weighed one pound over the Army’s ridiculous allowance for her height and age. Drill sergeants inspected her plate in the dining room, taking her bread, butter, potatoes, and anything sweet or fried. Total bullshit and a one-way ticket to bulimia, but she didn’t let it get to her. Instead, the weight-issues and caloric restrictions twisted around in her loop of logic. She thought our sin was forbidden caloric intake.

Her innocence and confusion killed me. Even the drill sergeant fought a grin. My abdominal muscles convulsed with laughter, making flutter kicks impossible. We jogged in place for another hour. I laughed manically and blocked the torturous rendition of *Prince*. I hummed to the *Flash Dance* soundtrack spinning in my head, *Maniac*. My energy renewed. I threw my arms in the air, danced around a phantom chair, and just like in the movie, I mimed pulling the shower cord. Chanda giggled.

We survived. With locked arms, we helped each other upstairs to our barracks. Big Mertz waited behind the double doors to the open bay. I wasn't mad at her anymore. I stole the soda. She ratted. I paid the penalty. Done. As I passed, Mertz grabbed my arm. "Boop, take care who you associate with. Beaners are trash."

I tackled Big Mertz and slammed her head into the highly shined tile floor. Wham. Wham. Wham. Mertz's eyeballs rolled to white. I saw a flash of red. Wham. Wham. Wham.

I gazed at ceiling panels above me as the floor tiles cooled my body. No air inflated my lungs. All the slamming confused me. After a moment, I realized that Grandma, often known as Psycho, had knocked the wind out of me. Grandma was the only black girl in Alpha-11. We called her Grandma because she slept in an old-lady dressing gown and plastic shower cap. She earned the second nickname by threatening to cut everyone. I feared and adored her.

Grandma sat on Mertz's chest, taking my place. She leaned down and snarled a whisper in Mertz's ear. "You rat one more time, you big, ugly bitch, and I'll cut your fucking throat."

Mertz didn't rat on me for the slam-fest or anything else after. She stayed away. If I entered the latrine, she gathered her toiletries and exited. She avoided my table in the mess

hall and stood as far from me as possible in formations. I had some sort of Grandma-mafia ring going on. That suited me fine.

With Grandma's help, I managed to stay out of trouble. The soda-pop incident equaled a minor infraction, but slamming Mertz was major. Minor infractions added up to patterns of misconduct, and I showed a pattern. I wanted to go home but not as a failure. My dad voiced disappointment because I set my sights low and joined the Army. The only thing worse than enlisting would be failing.

I thought about my dad's reaction to my enlistment that only sluts, dikes, and women far too ugly to catch a man joined the military. I wasn't ugly. Slut seemed a natural fit. I grew to understand my fierce love for Little Rivera was sisterly and overprotective. I didn't think I was a lesbian, but I kept options open, just in case.

On the seventh week of boot camp, and before our bivouac challenge, the training halted for a two-week break, Christmas exodus. Little Rivera and a few other girls stayed on base, but I flew home. My mom picked me up at the airport and took me to our family business, a little convenience store. I went into the cooler, emptied a beer box, and filled it full of candy, gum, cookies, and TaB. I taped the box shut and addressed it to Private Chanda Rivera. I said good-bye to her that morning, but by the afternoon, I missed her.

Over dinner, I unrolled rifle targets to show Dad. We talked of shot groups, trigger squeeze, and site pictures. Mom complimented my posture and improved manners. I spent the next morning in barn boots, hanging out with my chickens, pigs, and Pete, an Australian Shepard. As much as I had wanted to get off the farm, it was good to be home.

I called my recruiter, Sergeant Jimmy Walker. I wanted to show him my targets and thank him for helping me enlist. I hated the Army most days, but my parents seemed pleased with the new me, and that made me happy.

“Private, I’ve been expecting your call.”

“How did you know I came home?”

“Private, Sergeant Walker gets around. Listen. We have a situation. A young lady, much like you, wants to enlist, but her folks are reluctant. We need to visit them tonight, show them nice girls join the Army too. You must impress them, Soldier.”

“I made dinner plans with my grandparents tonight, Sergeant.”

“Private, I respect family life, but a soldier must go above and beyond the call of duty. Recruiting office, eighteen-hundred hours. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

Four desks lined the walls of the Army recruiting office. Green upholstered furniture with wood trim, a coffee table, and magazine rack created a lounge area against the windowed frontage. The station commander’s office was in back enclosed by privacy glass. The office belonged to Staff Sergeant Price.

Price commanded the office. He appeared older than other recruiters, about the same age as my parents. A gelled brick of reddish hair strategically covered a balding, freckled dome. His speech tangled in my ear. Walker called it hillbilly dialect. I thought Price sounded creepy, like in the movie *Deliverance*.

The office appeared vacant. Walker and Price laughed and talked in a room in back. I examined a photo on Walker’s desk while I waited. In the photo, he wore dress blues with gold

buttons. He was handsome, but his wife stole my eye with her red velvet gown. Blue and red contrasted sharply. His copper complexion mellowed against her cocoa-cream. Contrasts softened under the warmth of skin. The photo glowed. Smiles gleamed. A walnut frame captured the picture-perfect couple.

Sergeant Walker's trademark gapped smile made me smile. He was the first black man I knew to visit my lily-white school in Molalla, Oregon. Students gathered and listened to his southern accent, laughed at his jokes, and learned about Army adventures. I felt honored he needed help from me, Private Betty Boop, the cartoon soldier.

The sergeants joined me in the main office. They drank from red plastic cups. "Orange juice, Private?" said Price. I accepted.

"Sergeant Price, you sure this juice is all right?"

He laughed, filled my cup with more from the jug, and gave me an order. "Drink, Private. Drink the whole damn thing." I obeyed. The room whirled.

I whispered to Walker. "I'm sick. The juice is rotten."

"Silly Private. OJ and vodka, a screwdriver," said Walker. "Relax. Have another. Sergeant Walker's got things under control. Sergeant Walker's taking care of his soldier-girl."

My head spun. I drank juice. My cup never emptied. Walker yelled at me.

"How can you meet parents when you're drunk?"

"I'm sorry, Sergeant. I never drank vodka before and didn't expect to get drunk."

Price sneered. "Guess we made a mistake. Thought you was a true soldier. Thought you could handle yer liquor."

Walker spoke to Price. "How bout going to your place. Sober her up."

“Private,” said Price. “I hope yer proud. Now git yer ass in the car.”

I sat in the back seat. The car started. Legs and arms turned to lead. Head transformed into a cannon-ball. Eyes tunneled through the peep sites of an M-16 semi-automatic rifle. The car stopped. Door unlatched. Guts squeezed like a trigger. I shot projectiles of rotting orange.

My body moved, but not under my command. Sergeants struggled to heft dead weight. I apologized for not walking. My voice slurred slow and distorted like a record played at the wrong speed.

The juice numbed all but scent and sound. Without seeing, I knew Price owned a cat. Pungent ammonia of spent kitty litter commingled with cigarettes and stale beer. Odors permeated sofa pillows. I heard my first porn movie and slipped deeper into numbness.

I needed to go home. I forced my eyes open and made sound. Walker came over. “Private, I’m going to put you to bed. I’m going to call your folks. Say you got food poisoning. Don’t worry. Not gonna let anything happen to you.” I sighed with relief as he scooped my body from the sofa.

He carried me into a bedroom and laid me face down on a blue synthetic bedspread, the kind that snags hangnails and calloused feet. I heard the door close. Dark coolness surrounded me. I relaxed and invited sleep. I heard the rattle of a belt buckle, the pull of a zipper, and the soft thud of pants holding keys and a wallet.

“Sergeant Walker?” My voice sounded far away.

“Shut up, Private. Shut the fuck up.”

Walker wrestled my clothes and dead limbs. Soured oranges and stale cigarettes gagged me. Hand-to-hand combat diagrams scrolled by in black and white. Drill sergeants called out

movements by the numbers. My mind repeated in ghost-like cadence. Muscles failed to respond. I managed to deliver a shallow, “No.”

He pushed the back of my head down into the bedspread. I gasped for air. I breathed through his pattern of suffocate, release, suffocate, release. My lungs burned, and eyes bulged.

I anticipated the pain of dry penetration. I cringed as beads of his sweat splattered and pooled in the small of my back. The pool overflowed. Rivers trickled across my torso. I felt the rivers. Skin slapped skin. His weight forced air from my body like a deflated balloon. I don’t remember the pain of him inside me. This part refused to feel. This part played dead.

He collapsed on top of me. He whispered proclamations of love and admiration of my “sweet ass.” A wave of cologne crashed down on me – too sweet for a man and too musky for a woman.

I tried to vomit. He shoved my head back down into the blue bedspread and resumed slamming and suffocating. He would not let up. I gulped air as the mattress gave way between thrusts. I fought for life with my solo defense tactic, stolen breath.

The door-bell rang. Price panicked. “Jimmy! Jimmy! Your fucking wife. Your fucking wife is outside!”

Skin stopped slapping skin. Air rushed in. Lungs inflated. I heard rustling of keys and the pull of a zipper. I held my breath through the metallic clicking of a belt buckle and the opening and closing of the bedroom door. I exhaled, alone and alive. I rolled to my side, pulled knees to chest, and breathed.

Fire raged through my body, and salt stung my eyes. I knew I'd been had. Sergeant Walker snared me in a trap of gullibility and eagerness to please, but I blamed myself. Private Betty Boop, cartoon soldier and whore.

I returned to Fort McClellan on New Year's Day of 1986. Training resumed. Determined to put the rape behind me, I changed the story in my mind and out loud. I bragged to the girls of Alpha-11, saying my hometown recruiter had a crush me, but I didn't give him the time of day. I told the story to anyone that listened, and I almost believed my lie. I needed to believe. The pace of training and the company of the girls helped me recreate reality and move on, at least for the time being.

In the final week of boot camp, I crawled out of my shelter and waded through a dusting of snow. A burn barrel sparked in the morning frost. Teeth chattered. Thigh muscles contracted in charley-horse spasms, and every joint in my eighteen-year-old body ached. I huddled close to my sisters-in-arms and worshiped flickers of fire licking our gloved hands. No one spoke. Labeled platoon clown, I did my best to keep spirits high even when nothing was funny. A lump wedged in my throat. I blinked at the water in my eyes. I wanted hot food. I wanted my mom, and I wanted to go home.

Playing funny-girl was challenging work. It robbed energy and came with consequences, but I wasn't able to stop myself. Acting like a clown allowed me to avoid dark thoughts while searching for ways to keep my platoon entertained. Girls expected me to set the mood. They waited for the eye roll, the giggle, the face pulled when the drill sergeant turned his back. Humor was my job, my contribution to the platoon. Humor equaled relief.

Besides humor, relief came from gossip, bitching, and describing food or men we missed from back home. Girls from the Midwest talked about White Castle hamburgers with the same passion crab cakes were described by a girl from Maryland. I tried to relay the magic of grandma's razor clams, served in her Winnebago parked on the beach above low morning tide. Eastern girls found it weird that Oregon beaches were highways. Southern girls gagged at the idea of eating clams for breakfast. My stories of razor clams, Dungeness crab, and venison failed to inspire, but we all fantasized about those White Castle hamburgers while sitting in foxholes.

We were from everywhere, yet somehow found commonality on the topic of food. Food-talk lifted spirits, but my stomach growled like it was eating itself, so food-talk was out. Stories from home choked me up, and I ran short on jokes. I started with one of Dad's lines. "Wow, it's colder than a brass monkey's balls in a steel jock strap."

The line fell flat. A moment of silence followed, like a collective resistance to lift from emotional funk. Connors, a fellow Oregon girl with dark curly hair and blue eyes, caught her cue. "Yeah, colder than a witch's tits doing push-ups in the snow." As she grinned, the camouflage paint around her mouth creased and held her smile in Joker-like fashion.

"It's colder than a well-digger's butt," said Clawson with her country-bumpkin drawl.

"Not as cold as Drill Sergeant LaVictory's clit," said Poronczuk. Voices around the barrel groaned. I had no idea about the kind place Poronczuk came from. Where I came from, girls didn't use c-words to discuss body parts.

"Man, I hate that LaVictory bitch," said Mo. We uttered concurrences and drifted off into private miseries. Mo came from Minnesota, and even in uniform with her hair cut to

standard, she pulled off a Cyndi Lauper-ish, *Girls-Just-Wanna-Have-Fun* style. No amount of discipline drove the rebel out of her. She and I received more than our shares of discipline. We dropped into push-up position. Beads of sweat splattered the dirt below our faces. I'd catch her smirk out of the corner of my eye and start to giggle.

The drill sergeant yelled. "What we have here is a total lack of military bearing." He was correct. Mo was too proud to be broken. I was too stupid.

The barrel crowd quieted a moment before Barlo, a loud-mouthed blonde from Wisconsin, spoke up. "Hey, Boop, is it colder than the time you fucked a bus-boy in the middle of Sizzler's salad bar?"

"Barlo, you bitch," I said. "That's private. But yeah, it is colder than humping a bus-boy in a vat of green Jell-O salad with pineapple tidbits and mini-marshmallows." The barrel livened up.

The Sizzler incident took place days before shipping off to boot camp. Working as a salad bar girl had sucked – minimum wage and no tips. Sex in the Jell-O evened the score, my way of leaving on a positive. I told Barlo about Sizzler's in a truth-or-dare session during late night fire-guard duty. The story was supposed to be our secret.

My teeth chattered. Grandma comforted me. "Poor Boop, Big Mertz shoulda gave you lovins last night." Grandma cackled, showing the gap between her teeth. The girls joined in hen-house revelry. Big Mertz kept right on snoring.

Grandma liked teasing me, but she was oddly maternal. She defended me, kept me out of trouble, helped make my bed, and even braided my hair in ten rows. She bitched about

braiding each time. “Can’t believe I’m fixin a white bitch’s skanky hair.” But I knew she loved me.

The braiding ritual started after Drill Sergeant LaVictory walked up behind me in formation, flipped open her pocket knife, and sliced a lock of hair flying free from my bun. I exploded. Grandma calmed me and offered the solution. She reefed my hair, platted tight to the scalp, and made it impossible for even my wildest of hairs to escape.

I dug around in the snow for twigs to add to the burn barrel. A few girls joined me. We joked and carried on about my shelter buddy still snoring like a trucker.

“Boop, dontcha think ya better wake your girlfriend?” said Jersey.

“Fuck off,” I said. Laughter around the barrel perked back up.

Mertz annoyed the hell out of me, and I annoyed her. Observing our lack of love, Drill Sergeant Lowry paired us as battle buddies for the bivouac challenge. *Bivouac* meant camping the Army’s style. It was camping, bad camping, where everything sucked.

Stuck completing boot camp paired with my nemesis, we combined our two shelter-halves to create a shelter-whole. Mertz failed to grasp the notion of personal space, the concept of sleeping on her half. I spent the first night pressed against the musty canvas of my half while droplets of condensation tainted with her breath dripped from the shelter’s peak and froze to the ends of my braids.

I never learned her first name. We weren’t allowed first names. We called each other by last names, home cities and states, like Baltimore and Jersey. Or sometimes you got a nickname. I was from Molalla – Molalla, Oregon. Molalla was nowhere, not like Vegas or Chicago. People pronounced Oregon in a funny way. “Ory-gone.” Ory-gone wasn’t a decent

nickname anyway. I was stuck with Betty Boop. Some girls called my battle buddy, “Ethel Mertz.” But I grew up with one television channel and rarely caught reruns of *I love Lucy*, so I didn’t get the joke. I called her “Big Mertz,” and it stuck. It wasn’t a witty nickname. Mertz was her last name, and she was big. Kind of a no-brainer. The girl filled a shelter-half, hers and mine.

Mertz was a Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps recruit, fresh out of high school. She played make-believe Army for four years in a school club. Her practice earned her a set of mosquito wings she wore on her lapel – PV2 Mertz. She outranked most of us. As a PV1, I had nothing to pin on my collar. I admit to a touch of jealousy. Her four-year commitment as a make-believe soldier probably had something to do with her contempt for my lack of commitment as a real soldier. She spent years preparing to enlist. I had agreed to join over an order of mexi-fries in the school cafeteria.

Big Mertz possessed the elusive military bearing that slipped through my hands. She knew the ranks, the phonetic alphabet, how to wear the uniform, how to make hospital corners on a bed, and how to march, but she sucked at push-ups. She rolled on the concrete, moaning like a harpooned whale. It was humiliating. Drill sergeants, along with the three platoons of males in Alpha Company, laughed their asses off at us. We were singled and taunted during physical challenges. Almost everything about boot camp was physical. We were first platoon, twenty-five un-strong, and all female.

During punishments, my platoon stayed locked in the push-up position until Mertz got off the concrete. Arms quaked and backs sagged. Muscle failure tapped on shoulders like the Grim Reaper. One by one, my sisters collapsed to the concrete, moaning whale songs like Big

Mertz. Mo never failed. Connors and I did our best to hang in there with Mo, and so did Little Rivera. No matter how hard we tried, the daily dose of ridicule was unavoidable.

Big Mertz emerged from the tent as the chow truck arrived with breakfast. The chow truck gave me a sense of relief. I pictured a mobile kitchen, a lunch wagon, or a catering van. I was wrong.

My platoon unloaded boxes from the back of the truck. Drill Sergeant Lowry cut through the cardboard and tossed out bread-loaf sized packages. He called the package an MRE, an acronym for *Meal Ready to Eat*.

The promise of food in a surprise package boosted morale. I enjoyed the chatter of my comrades as we ripped open the MRE's. Food filled an aching void. Slick packaging and novel contents served as makeshift gifts, souvenirs, and bivouac trinkets. The MRE package contained all sorts of oddities, none of which I wanted to eat for breakfast, but fascinating all the same. Girls clustered around the barrel and compared meals. I got chicken a la king. Mertz received meatballs in BBQ sauce. Barlo held up ham slices with pineapple cake. The ham looked like Spam, complete with jellied bits. Connors had a pork patty and applesauce. I tried to get her to trade, but no deal. Little Rivera got beans in tomato sauce and a chocolate brownie. I wanted to trade my whole meal for the brownie. Rivera realized the value of a brownie and disappeared. She hid behind a tree, an easy task while camouflaged.

All of our packages contained Chiclets, blue toilet paper, a brown spoon, condiments, waterproof matches, crackers, cheese or peanut butter, and cocoa mix. We didn't have hot water, and weren't allowed to heat anything in our burn barrel. Chocolate and other candy

were declared contraband. We ate the cocoa mix dry and laughed, and coughed, and choked, and loved every bit of it.

I sorted through the contents of my MRE, stowing matches, blue toilet paper, and Chiclets in my cargo pockets. I read the black words stenciled on the brown foil packet and wondered what flavors awaited. I never tried chicken a la king before. I stayed positive and whipped open the foil. I sniffed the pale substance. Unsure of expected consistency, I gave it a poke with my spoon. It was frozen.

Drill Sergeant Lowry sat in his tent. The roast of coffee percolating on his stove tortured me. He had warm water to thaw my chicken a la king. Surely he wanted his Private Betty Boop to enjoy breakfast. I approached his tent with trembling knees, frozen chicken a la king, and spoon in hand. I knocked on the placard bearing his name and announced, "Drill Sergeant, Private Boop requests permission to enter."

"Private Boop." He boomed, "What are you doing outside my tent?"

"Drill Sergeant." I tried to sound brave, but my voice cracked. "My breakfast... It's, ah, frozen." A sob leaked from my body, as he parted the tent door and towered over me. Warm air escaped from the flap. The kerosene stove emitted dizzying waves of heat, luring me in. I leaned forward and tried to charm the waves into my pockets, but none came. He stiffened at my closeness. I regained composure and stepped back. He wore his Smokey Bear hat. I wondered if he slept in it.

He held out a hand, palm up. Dark chocolate on the backside and light cream, like mine, on the underside. I placed the pouch in his hand.

“Poor, Private Betty Boop, your breakfast *is* frozen.” He shook his head in sympathy, giving me a false ease before he barked. “Give me your spoon Private.”

I obeyed and handed over my spoon. Holding the pouch open with one hand, he flipped my spoon upside down and thrust the handle into the frozen meal. He removed the food from the pouch, displaying a bar of Chicken A La King suspended on the handle of a plastic spoon.

“There you go. Chicken-on-a-stick. Drive on Soldier. Drive on!”

I grabbed my chicken Popsicle. He grinned, sending a wave of white teeth flashing before me. He laughed at me and my frozen breakfast.

I sat on a rock, licked my chicken freeze-pop, and missed home. A tear rolled down my cheek and caught in the corner of my mouth. Salty, just like the Popsicle. Connors plopped next to me, offering up applesauce.

She touched the wet trail carved in my camouflaged make-up and motioned to Barlo and Mo. Little Rivera picked up on the signal from her hiding spot and shuffled over. I tried to rally, tell a joke, and act like I wasn’t crying, but I held my chicken Popsicle like a heartbroken child holds headless Barbie.

Connors squeezed applesauce into my mouth. Rivera distributed shards of brownie shattered between two rocks. Mo broke the rules and lowered a package of fruit cake into the burn barrel. She split the metallic-tainted cake between the five of us. Delicious. Barlo offered the ham-Spam. Nobody took her up on it. Her ham-Spam stunk like cat food. She carved the meat into a turtle and ate it anyway. Food and sisterly love patched my soul like a bandage and a kiss to a skinned knee.

Soul pampering continued. Barlo dug around in her cargo pocket and fished out a stash of moist towelettes. She gave me a field expedient facial. Breakfast and the spa treatment eased the pain as Barlo scrubbed away green, loam, and black.

Mo took over and applied a fresh coat of makeup. My sisters smiled while Mo painted my camouflage with precision. When finished, she held up a signaling mirror. I gazed into the mirror, thrilled at a woodland Gene Simmons smiling back at me. I licked at my chicken-on-a-stick, careful not to smudge the demonic black lipstick.

We survived the week in the field and gathered in the Armory, cleaning weapons, laughing, and happy to be out of the cold. Bivouac, the final challenge of boot camp ended that morning. We were filthy, hungry, but victorious. We stood at long tables, inhaled cleaning solvent and rammed metal rods with swatches soaked in oil down barrels of M16s. I stood next to my nemesis, Big Mertz. Too tired to fight, I congratulated her, and we engaged in a civil conversation about police academy, our next training phase.

Sergeant Lamb ran the armory. He stood over six-feet tall, with blonde hair, sleepy blue eyes, and rack of muscles I'd only seen in fitness magazines. Self-conscious in his presence, suddenly too aware of the camouflage paint crusted to my face, the olive bandana holding dark braids, and my odor, I pulled the collar of my BDU blouse open and sniffed. Campfire, sweat, and a week without a shower saturated my uniform.

I tried to steer clear of Sergeant Lamb, but he took a position at the same table and stood next to me. He flirted. I flirted back. I batted my eyes as he peered down the barrel of my half-cleaned weapon. He winked at me and smiled. "Good to go, girl."

I grabbed weapons from Connors, Vegas, and Little Rivera. I armed myself with the same playful eye contact, a blend of sex and innocence. Each poorly cleaned weapon passed inspection. I flirted our way to freedom. We were free to go to the barracks, free to shower and relax until dinner.

“Hold up,” said Sergeant Lamb. “You’re my new assistant.”

“Why certainly, Sergeant.”

“Call me, Lamb.”

“Alright, Lamb.” I tossed a wink at the girls who giggled on their way out of the armory.

I helped inspect weapons, grabbing Big Mertz’s first. I knew her barrel would be perfect. Four years of Junior Reserve Officer training Corps (JROTC) built these kinds of skills. “You’re good,” I said.

“No way, just like that?” She expected the usual dose of petty bullshit out me.

“Yeah, get going. You stink like all hell!”

She laughed, executed a high-five, and headed for the barracks. For a moment, we were almost friends. My platoon dwindled as one by one, weapons passed inspection and girls headed to the showers.

“Permission to be excused?” I asked Lamb after placing the last weapon in a steel rack.

“Not yet. Gotta move stuff to storage.” I packed up the cleaning kits into recycled ammo cans. With arms loaded down, I followed him out the back door of the armory and into to a walk-in storage box. I placed the cans where he ordered and turned to leave. “Not so fast,” he closed the storage box doors and pressed me against a steel wall.

“Wait,” I tried to push him away. I liked him, had flirted with him, but never intended to pursue. He outranked me. I worried about fraternization, the forbidden intimacy between soldiers of different ranks. But most of all, I worried about getting raped, again.

“Ain’t gonna hurt you, girl. C’mon, kiss me.” He pressed me hard against the wall. His lips brushed mine. I thought about my bad breath, the lack of field oral hygiene, the sore chap of my dry lips, and the stench of my uniform.

I tried to stall. “Wait. I’m gross. Haven’t showered...”

“Nah, you’re beautiful.” He laughed and rammed his tongue in my mouth. “Kiss back, dammit.”

I obeyed. The kiss progressed. I froze. The act ended quickly. A few thrusts in and he went soft and slid out. An odor of briny low-tide overpowered the cleaning solvent and filled the storage box. I buttoned my pants and buckled the belt while trying to move around his hulking body. He grabbed my shoulders and held me at arms’ length.

“You’re my girl, now.”

“Okay.”

“I’m your man, your new boyfriend.”

“Okay.”

“What’s your name?”

“Christine.”

“I love you, Christine.”

“Okay.”

“Say it back. Tell me you love me.”

"I love you, Lamb."

"That's my girl."

"I'll sneak by to visit you tonight."

"Okay."

Connors pulled the first assignment as fireguard that night. Lamb slipped through the double doors of our barracks. He dressed in jeans, a snug tee-shirt, combat boots, and a black leather jacket. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dark, to recognize him without his uniform. I was still awake, hiding out in the latrine shining my boots. I heard him and Connors talking in whispers. "Gotta hang out with Christine."

"Who?"

"My girl, Christine. Dark hair. Braids."

"Oh, God. You must be talking about Boop."

I rushed out of the bathroom. Connors panicked. It was her job to keep intruders out of the barracks, but she never received challenge before, a challenge from a hulking man holding a large box of pizza.

I shoved Connors and Lamb into the latrine. "You're going to wake the whole platoon."

"Told you I'd sneak in," said Lamb.

"What do you want?"

He tapped the top of the pizza box. "Dinner with my girl."

Connors, Lamb, and I sat on the latrine floor. Connors and I choked down slices of pizza, eating at throw-up speed, trying to end the dangerous dinner date before we got busted.

"You're crazy," I said.

“Crazy for you,” said Lamb.

“No shit,” said Connors.

Lamb handed me a cassette for my Walkman, Twisted Sisters, *Leader of the Pack*. I never understood why. Connors shared my secret and the cassette. She shared a frequent pizza, soda pop, and a steady flow of chocolate. Lamb became my contraband dealer. He fetched whatever the girls and I wanted. His visits scared me, but I learned to obey, kiss back, use the situation to my advantage, and enjoy the spoils of forbidden late-night rendezvous.

I had only been in the Army a short while, but quickly learned the harsh truths about the abuse of power and the cultural norms of sexual harassment. By the end of boot camp, I learned of my own powers, my powers as a female in a male dominant organization. Some might call my new-found power a defense mechanism. Others might call it a form of sexual manipulation. I viewed this power as a tool, a tool I kept razor sharp.

I learned to stuff memories of the first rape down. I learned to compartmentalize, and sort highs, lows, norms, and extremes. This came in handy as future assaults waited on the horizon. I learned to gather episodes of *military sexual trauma* (MST) and lump ugliness too painful to process. I learned to drink away unfortunate memories and tuck the pain in dark recesses of my mind. I learned fear, rage, and hatred.

What I did not learn was how to keep the pain stored during times of stress, illness, and exposure to sensory triggers. I failed to understand that pain continued to burn in the subconscious mind, and that no amount of alcohol snuffed out embers waiting to spark into a flame. I wouldn't learn until decades later, the flame had a name, *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (PTSD).

Currently, there are over 1.5 million people serving on active duty in the US Armed Forces. About 250,000 or approximately fifteen percent are women. One in three of these women will report sexual trauma. That's over 83,000 abused female soldiers. Sixty percent of these women warriors will develop PTSDs. These facts only include women on active duty, and only include women who report the abuse.

The statistics are as real now as they were back in the 1980s, when I joined the military. Nothing much has changed. The Veteran's Administration (VA) churns out acronyms and abbreviation with each global campaign, medical crisis, or demographic change. MST is the latest catch phrase for an old problem, another clever abbreviation to diminish the severity.

Military sexual trauma is not gender-specific. However, the number of reported cases of abuse is much higher amongst women. I suspect the number of unreported abuse incidents double the available statistics. My first assault never moved beyond Staff Sergeant Price. He swore I asked for rape, wanted it, and even earned it. Convinced no one would believe a lowly private over two decorated Sergeants, I stuffed it down. What else could I do? Fear of reprisal, bullying, lack of support, and humiliation sealed lips, and the cycle raged on.

Chapter 2: Fresh Meat

I left Fort McClellan, Alabama after my 19th Birthday in late March of 1986. I held orders for the 558th Military Police Company in Germany. Travelling abroad was my dream come true, a chance to get far away from Hicksville-Molalla, Oregon.

I understood a new assignment meant putting up with much of the same crap dealt with in boot camp and Military Police Academy. I was fresh meat, but armed with a new confidence and toughness built in training. Gone was the scared farm kid, but I could do nothing about the fact that I was still female.

I calloused to most of the name-calling in boot camp, but still struggled with some gender-oriented slander. The drill sergeants rarely used our last names. They assigned creative labels. *Bucket head* and *Ragbag* were common. *Fuck Stick* made me laugh, but I hated being called *Female*. A drill sergeant would yell out, “Come here, fee-male.” The emphasis on the first syllable made my sex sound like a swear word. Fee-male. Spewed like an insult – less than a man, much less than a real soldier. Female didn’t bother me half as much as *Charley-Romeo*. Charley-Romeo was phonetic code for cum receptacle.

Sergeant Alder picked Ronnie, Twist, and me up at Frankfort International Airport. He greeted us with a surly, “Get in the Jeep, dirt bags.” I didn’t flinch. Dirt bag was hardly offensive. We just completed seventeen weeks of hell. Alder didn’t scare me.

We threw our duffel bags in back of the Jeep and jumped in. I met Twist while in training. We were not in the same unit together, but I met him at a Sunday church service.

“They call me Twist,” he said.

“Why?”

He rotated his hips in a grinding circle. "Cause I'm so good."

"Gross."

"Your loss. You ain't my type anyway."

"Good. You're definitely not my type either."

Twist and I met Ronnie on the flight over. Ronnie was a freckled face kid from Kentucky. He sat next to me on the plane. The whole way to Germany, I received sermon on all the ways Jesus loved me. We made Ronnie ride up front with the sergeant.

I didn't care much for Twist, but felt relieved to sit next to him as the German countryside rolled by. We headed to Kriegsfeld Army Depot, not far from the French border. The depot was a nuclear physical security site, and the ass crack of all overseas assignments. When stuck in an ass crack, it's good to have someone watch your back, even someone like Twist.

I joined the Army as a military police officer. My recruiter said I'd drive a patrol car, hand out traffic tickets, and wear a snappy uniform. None of that came true. There's another side to the MP corps, a side my recruiter failed to mention. Unlucky bastards like Twist, Ronnie, and me ended up as Tower Rats, guarding nuclear warheads in some remote shithole. I wasn't political, but understood enough to be against nuclear arms and against spending hours in a tower guarding weapons of mass destruction.

Mo, an Alpha-11 girl, received orders to Kriegsfeld too. I hadn't seen her since graduation, and she wasn't on my flight. I mentioned her name to the sergeant.

"Yeah, goofy fee-male. Fucked up hair. Bossy little cunt. Picked her up a few days ago," he said.

“Yup, that’s her all right.”

I hated the c-word and found it impossible to say out loud. Another Alpha-11 girl, Private Poronczuk from Jersey, tossed the word around as easily as she said, “Hello.” I used to cringe, but after five months of Poronczuk spewing out the word, *cunt*, I numbed to the power.

We made our first stop at the 558th MP headquarters in Kaiserslautern, about an hour from our final destination. We filed in front of the command sergeant-major and stood at parade rest. His voice flooded with warmth and fatherly advice. His dark skin crinkled at the corners of expressive eyes. Silver dusted his temples. He welcomed the three of us, delivered a pep talk and warned about the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse common to Kriegsfeld. He excused the two male soldiers. I stood alone, buckling at the knees.

He motioned to a chair. “Take a seat, Private.” I obeyed.

“You’re quite a looker, private. You’re going to have problems. You understand?”

“No, Command Sergeant-Major.”

“Don’t let them get to you. Understand?”

Confused and lost for words, I nodded.

“Get yourself a big boyfriend. Bigger the better. Understand?”

I nodded.

“Don’t let them get to you.” He stood, and I stood. He patted my shoulder. “Be careful, kid.”

I left his office and joined the others. Twist and Ronnie questioned my private forum. I didn’t share.

It was dark out when Sergeant Alder pulled into a shower of light and stopped the Jeep outside the front gate of the depot. An MP checked our documents. A second MP with a German Sheppard walked a perimeter around our vehicle. The dog sniffed at wheel wells and our duffel bags. The dog made me think of Pete, my cattle dog from home. I wanted to pet the German Sheppard, but knew better. The gate slid open, and we went through. The MP with the Sheppard laughed. "See you newbies tomorrow tonight."

Ronnie fidgeted in the front seat. "Sergeant, what did he mean by that?"

Alder spit a string of tobacco juice out the side of the Jeep and said, "Initiation to the hill."

"The hill?" said Ronnie.

"You live and die for hill, at least in Second Platoon, my platoon. I got you and the split-tail. The other little dickhead belongs to Third-Herd. Tomorrow is your welcome party."

I gave Twist a questioning look and mouthed the word split-tail. He pointed to the button-fly on my BDU pants. I rolled my eyes at the latest term for my gender and rethought my disdain for being called, female.

"What kind of initiation?" said Ronnie.

"It's a secret. Best stick together."

"Whatever," said Twist. He waved his hand in the air like he wasn't scared. Ronnie was scared and so was I.

I checked into an empty room in the female barracks. I planned to move in with Mo in the morning, but for the night, the room served as home. A chalky blue covered the walls

surrounding a set of twin beds, two wall lockers, a dingy mirror, and a white mini-fridge with dents shaped like fists. The tiled floor gleamed.

I emptied my duffel bag on the spare mattress and picked up a nightstick. Bought as a souvenir while in MP academy, the billy-club wasn't standard issue and didn't meet regulations. This club was longer and thicker than standard, and totally badass. I swung it around at pretend perpetrators and jabbed the air before hanging it on my bedpost. I shook wrinkles from uniforms and hung them in the wall locker. I rooted around the pile and fished out a bag of toiletries.

Someone knocked at the door. I swung it open, hoping to find Mo.

"How you doing? The name's Tucker."

"What's up?"

"Stopping by to see if you need anything." He leaned in the doorway, sliding one foot passed the threshold.

"What would I need?"

"Like an extra blanket or something."

"You a supply guy?"

"No, 619th Ordinance."

"Okay?"

"But I can get stuff, anything you want."

"I'll keep that in mind." I tried to shut the door, but Tucker leaned all the way inside. I didn't want to be rude, but I didn't want a guest.

"What's your hurry?" He pushed the door back open.

“Just tired.”

“How bout I get you settled. I can help put stuff away.” He motioned to the bed heaped with clothes.

“Thanks but I’m hitting the rack. Got to brush my teeth first.” I patted my toiletries case.

“Latrine is down the hall.”

“I know. It was nice to meet you, Tucker. Good night.”

“Night, Doll.”

I washed my face, brushed my teeth twice, plucked stray eyebrows, and squeezed at a pimple forming on my chin. I stalled, trying to waste time. I wanted to be sure Tucker left the hallway. I stepped out of the latrine, and the coast was clear.

I put sheets and a wool blanket on the bunk. The pillow flattened to the weight of my head, and the blanket let in the cold. The mattress sagged in the middle, but jet lag overtook me.

I woke to the creaking sound of a wall locker door. I heard breathing. I bolted up, drew the nightstick from the bedpost, and swung at the dark.

“Who’s there?”

“Hey Doll, don’t be scared.”

I could not see, but I recognized Tucker’s voice, and swung toward the sound. The stick connected to meat. I swung again and again. I heard the crack of bone and the hallow thud of skull. Tucker screamed.

The nighttime duty officer knocked on my door. “Everything all right?”

“No!” I kept swinging.

"You all right in there?"

"Help!" I yelled and kicked at the moaning coming from the floor.

The duty officer worked the lock, and the room flooded with light. Blood dripped from a split in Tucker's lip and a knot purpled and pulsed on his left temple.

"Tucker, you dumbass," said the duty officer. He laughed and dragged Tucker into the hallway. "Jesus, girl. You fucked Tucker up. Killer stick work. I mean, you fucked him good."

"He was hiding in my locker."

"Yeah, he does that. You okay?"

"I guess."

"Lock your door, get some sleep."

"What about him?"

"I'll call his buddies."

"Call security. He ought to be arrested for that crap."

"Nah. He didn't hurt nobody."

"You serious?"

"Welcome to the hill, girly. Better get used to it. Now get some sleep."

I met up with Mo in the morning. She knew all about Tucker before I told her. "He came to my door the first night too," she said. "You can't trust these fuckers."

"Yeah, guess you're right."

"Toughen up Boop. You can't let them get to you."

"I fucked up."

"Damn right you did. Pull your head out of your ass."

"I'll try. You scared about tonight?"

"Fuck no. I know what's going down."

"How?"

"The big dyke down the hall."

"How you know she's a dyke?"

"She checked out my shit in the shower."

"Gross."

"No shit."

"So, what did she way was going to happen?"

"Beer-bonging. Three beers."

"Three? Big damn deal. Who cares?"

"German beer, Parkbrau Perminator. Sounds like terminator, huh?"

"So what?"

"Parkbrau Perminator will knock you on your ass, Boop."

"Doubt it."

"Ever beer bong? Ever even drank German beer."

"Well, no."

"Trust me. You're gonna get fucked-up fast. No telling what those pigs got planned."

"Should we warn Twist and Ronnie?"

"No. They'll be fine."

Rain fell in sheets as we ran to the male MP barracks. My jeans and old high school sweatshirt sagged under the weight of the downpour. Mo wore jeans too. Hers were torn off at

the knees, ripped on purpose, like the missing neckline of her pink sweatshirt. The sweatshirt draped off one shoulder exposing her bra, like in the movie, *Flashdance*. She wore a rainbow of rubber bracelets and neon-green hoops in her ears. I admired her style.

We joined Ronnie and Twist in the dayroom of the men's barracks. Dark bottles of beer covered one end of the pool table. I noticed a long blue funnel with surgical tubing attached and figured the apparatus must be the beer-bong.

A blond guy wearing aviator sunglasses introduced himself. "I'm Wolf, second platoon." He patted a shorter guy on the shoulder. "This here is Booty from Third-herd. He's got the fattest ass in Germany." Booty flipped around and shook his butt. The crowd, all guys from first, second, and third platoons, whistled. Booty's ass was enormous and oddly out of proportion with the rest of his lean body.

"Excuse me, Mr. Booty, Mr. Wolf," said Ronnie. "I don't drink beer. Against my religion."

"Is that right?" Wolf threw his arms in the air. "Fucking newbie don't drink beer?"

The crowd chanted, "Pummel! Pummel! Pummel..."

Ronnie glanced at us in a panic. Wolf pointed down the barracks hallway and shouted. "Run, little fucker, run."

Like a rabbit, Ronnie shot down the hallway toward the double doors leading outside. Three guys broke from the pack to chase. Ronnie found the exit. He slammed into the door, hit the release bar, but nothing happened. The door was locked. I couldn't see Ronnie. He cried out from under a pile of bodies. The pile grew larger as knees and elbows slammed into Ronnie's head and slight frame.

Wolf called the pummel party to a halt. "Alright, that's enough. Let the little fucker up." Ronnie got to his feet. Blood poured from his nose. One eye swelled shut.

"Come here, kid," said Booty. Two platoon mates hauled him to the center of the room. Booty rubbed Ronnie's head, "Welcome to the hill, son." Ronnie spat blood, performed a wobbly victory dance, and slid under the pool table to recover.

Wolf approached Mo, Twist, and me. "What'll it be, bitches? Beer or a beat down?"

"Beer," we said.

Twist stepped behind Mo and me. "Ladies first."

"I got this," said Mo. Booty held the bong upright. Mo put her thumb over the end of the surgical tubing. Wolf poured three beers into the funnel.

The crowd chanted, "Suck, suck, suck..." Mo stuffed the tube to the back of her throat and emptied the funnel. Not a drop spilled. The crowd shouted approval. Mo burped a thunderous, thank-you. Booty smacked her ass. Wolf picked her up in a bear hug and swung her around three times. She laughed as he poured her on a vinyl couch against the wall.

I stepped forward and copied Mo. The bong was full. The crowd chanted. I pushed the tube to the back of my mouth. Beer gushed down my throat. I could not breathe. The liquid backed up and sprayed from pursed lips. Wolf grabbed the tube and forced it deeper. He hit my gag reflex. I barfed, launching beer and the greasy chili-mac I ate in the chow hall two hours earlier. Wolf wore most of my dinner but didn't seem to care. "We got us a virgin here!"

The crowd rallied support despite my failure. Booty loaded another beer into the bong, "Take it slow, little sister. You can do this." I acted like a dork, but got one bottle down. Mo

faded on the vinyl couch. After the congratulatory slaps on my ass, I nudged her back to consciousness, and we made our escape.

I helped Mo to bed and placed the trash can on the floor by her head. She drew a few deep breaths and drifted off to sleep. I opened the mini-fridge and stared at emptiness. My stomach was empty too. I never liked chili-mac, never ate the stuff before enlisting. Wads of mystery meat and bloated macaroni swam in a chili-powered tomato sauce. I craved an old-fashioned hamburger and fries.

I changed from the beer soaked sweatshirt, opting for Mo's pink one. I slid into dry jeans and flip-flops and headed out the door. The rain let up as I cut across the compound, making my way to the enlisted club. The party from the men's barracks filled the club. Twist rested his head on the bar. He stunk of Perminator. I tapped his shoulder, and he slurred something unintelligible. I wiped his spit from my face.

I sat next to Twist and ordered a burger. Wolf plopped next to me and ordered two shots of Wild Turkey. I sized him up. I could tell he liked me, but he looked a little skinny for the mission of *big boyfriend*. I mumbled the Command Sergeant Major's words, "The bigger the better."

We drank the shots together, followed by two shots of Old Granddad, two of Crown Royal, two of Ouzo, and then too many rounds of a clear liquid set on fire. I smelled singed hair and fingered a burn hole in Mo's pink sweatshirt. I never ate my burger.

I stumbled back to the barracks and slipped into the room. Daylight streamed through a split in the curtains. My stomach growled. Mo rolled over in her bed. "Where the fuck you been?"

“Got hungry. Went to the club.”

“Bullshit. It’s daylight. Where you been?”

“I went to get a burger but got drunk with Wolf. I burnt my hair and your sweatshirt.”

“Where you been?”

“With Wolf.”

“God. Did you fuck him?”

“Not sure. Probably.”

“He use a rubber.”

“Can’t remember.”

“You’re a dumb cunt.”

“I know.”

“You let em get to you. Didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

After initiation night, word spread about my indiscretion with Wolf. Our barracks room became a popular hangout for other soldiers hoping for a piece of Wolf’s luck. I slipped up a few more times, and my popularity flourished. I became the slut that my father warned me about.

Wolf prowled the female barracks for a month or so, trying to find his way into my rack. I never let him in. Desperate for another turn, he volunteered as my trainer for main gate duty. I worked the main gate through the spring and summer while waiting for my security paperwork to clear. I didn’t mind the gate. Wolf mellowed out a bit. He even tried to protect me against the sexual advances from the German guards that worked alongside us.

Everyone who worked on post had to clear the main gate every day. It was a great way to meet people. I learned to look forward to the arrival of some vehicles, and I learned to dread the arrival of others, like our company commander, Captain Goode. Captain Goode found fault with my uniform, my salute, my weapon, and took exception to my smile. I couldn't please the man and didn't really want to.

My favorite arrival was the Ice Cream Man. He came twice per week during the spring and summer. I heard the recorded circus calliope churning before the truck arrived. My hometown in rural Oregon lacked ice cream men. He was my first. My heart danced, and I grew light in my boots despite a Kevlar vest, helmet, and weapon. I acted like a ten year old with a pocketful of burning change.

The driver was a Greek man. He spoke little English, and I don't think he spoke much German. Wolf and I worked the front gate with a German security guard. Other than routine commands, no one communicated with the driver. We inspected documents and asked him to wait next to the truck. I watched over the driver with my weapon at port arms, while the senior MP boarded the truck and performed a search.

The Ice cream man wore a carpet of dark curls that fell to the middle of his back. Corkscrew bangs brushed black eyebrows. He wore drawstring pants, sneakers, and pullover shirt with a hood, all monochromatic in white. His eyes soothed like milk chocolate and his skin glowed olive. I loved his style, unique, the antithesis of the soldiers I worked with every day. Cut from a travel magazine, he was pasted to the hellish collage of my new military life.

We engaged in the same routine each time at the gate. He held his hands in the air. "Okay, Baby. Okay, Baby." He bobbed his head while repeating his lines. I tried to tell him to put

his hands down, and I tried to explain he was not my prisoner. He just smiled, winked, and kept to his refrain. His smile sent a flush of heat to my cheeks.

Barracks buildings emptied with the onset of the truck's music. Soldiers barreled out, screaming, "Ice cream man! Ice cream man!" I loved how the Ice cream man turned soldiers into kids again. Twenty minutes each week, we forgot to miss home. We forgot to hate the Army. We forgot we were the same fools in towers guarding bunkers filled with weapons of mass destruction.

On his way out of the gate, the Ice Cream Man stopped and handed free scoops to Wolf and to the German guard. My dish took longer. A scoop of fig, a scoop of honey, and a portion of black current arranged drowned in blackberry liquor. He added a generous dollop of whipped cream and topped the creation with a brandied cherry. He always handed the dish to Wolf, the senior MP, as if I needed permission to eat ice cream. "Okay? For Baby. Okay?" He stayed put until I took the first bite.

All eyes were on me. I nodded my head as the first spoonful of icy fig melted into a smile. I whispered a thank-you and spooned in a bite of honey. I fell in love each visit. Life seemed simple and honest. Impossible to duplicate, the sensation of cool cream met the hot blush of a young MP with a burning crush on her Greek Ice Cream Man. Each time he drove out my gate, I looked forward to his return. I needed to feel that way again, just one more moment, one more time.

Wolf didn't give up his quest until after I cycled through several boyfriend candidates and settled on a squad leader named, Steve. Steve was the largest soldier on post, the bigger the better. I figured he would do.

My clearance papers finally arrived, and I was through with Wolf and the front gate. I stood within ranks of first platoon. It was mid-September in 1986, my sixth month at the depot, and my first month serving as a Tower Rat. The early autumn sun streamed through pines and warmed my silhouette. My shadow stretched lean before sprawling into lumps of gear.

An olive drab Kevlar helmet, matching flack vest, a load bearing equipment belt, rucksack bulged with sleeping bag, two canteens, ammo pouches stuffed with four twenty-round magazines, and my M16 automatic rifle made me larger than life.

My platoon awaited inspection in guard mount formation. Guard mount accounted for troops, weapons, and equipment before taking over a duty rotation and occupying the look-out towers on the hill, but it also served as a shakedown for contraband. Music, reading material, playing cards, writing paper and other distractions were prohibited within the fenced perimeter surrounding the hill. The hill contained a control center, seven steel towers, a ratty bunk room with break area, and bunkers housing nuclear war heads.

Loaded with gear, I appeared much greater than my naked reflection in the mirror revealed. A changing body provided daily contradiction. I was almost woman yet girly, stacked with cut muscles of an athletic boy. A small lump swelled in my abdomen. Mind and body tracked conflicting time. The body supported new life, but my mind drifted in and out of pregnancy. If I ignored the signs, the alien might not be real.

My reflection argued with me each morning, but I didn't shop for a crib or highchair. I didn't read pregnancy books, buy baby clothes, or knit a set of booties. I stopped smoking, quit drinking, and stayed clear from the hash, speed, cocaine, and acid used by many tower rats.

Drugs and alcohol eased the monotony and loneliness of our lives. My self-designed prenatal plan left no escape.

Sobriety caused unnecessary attention. Rumors spread. I was an undercover cop out to bust up the drug ring. Paranoia and accusations flourished. I withdrew from platoon mates and friends, increasing the sense of isolation.

Sergeant Alder worked his way through the platoon, feeling up soldiers, until he stood in front of me. "Fine morning, Private."

"Good morning, Sarge."

"Got anything I should know about?"

"No, Sergeant Alder."

"What's in the ruck."

"Just my sleeping bag."

"Why the fart sack?" He knew the answer but enjoyed asking. I refused to sleep in the four community bunks, *hot racking*, reusing sheets and blankets during sleep rotations.

"I like my sleeping bag." Not a lie but not the whole truth. I carried the sleeping bag to avoid crabs and other forms of vermin. The beds were infested. Gang-banging the local German chicks was a favorite pastime. Platoons cycled through the same girls and transported the crawly little fuck-trophies up to the hill to share with the rest of the soldiers. I slept under the beds on the concrete floor, curled up with daddy-long-leg spiders and dust bunnies. I tried a couch in the dayroom, but practical jokers and perverts found a sleeping girl tempting.

"All right princess. You something special, eh?"

"No, not really, Sergeant."

“Permission to touch the princess?”

“Sure, no problem.”

Familiar with the drill, I unsnapped my equipment belt. Canteens and ammo pouches sagged. I tugged at the chin strap of my Kevlar and slid the helmet from dark braids. I thought about the legend of Specialist Sue Earls. I never met Earls. She had transferred before I arrived. According to rumor she refused to remove her helmet during guard mount. The sergeant removed her helmet and out popped a double-headed dildo. People say Sue got bored during the long hours of tower duty and found a new way to occupy time. I thought of Sue as a master prankster, my kind of my hero. I fantasized about twisting a chocolate double-header inside my helmet and giving Alder a heart attack when the thing sprang to life. The image made me smile.

“Got a fucking problem, private?”

“No, Sarge.”

“Got something funny you’d like to share?”

“Nope. Sorry. Daydreaming again.”

“Get your goddam head in the game.”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“Unbutton your BDU blouse.”

I complied, exposing my brown tee-shirt. Alder patted down my legs, traced fingers around the tops of my boots, and eyed my belted waist. I winced as his cold hands fumbled along the waistband of my trousers and rested on the swell of my stomach. His dull, grey eyes made contact with my brown eyes.

“You gaining weight, Private?”

“Too much beer, Sarge.”

“Thought you quit drinking.”

“Yeah. Now you know why.”

“Good. Don’t want fat broads in my platoon.”

His hands inched lower. Bile stirred in my gut. He chuckled as his fingertips brushed pubic hair.

“Get your fucking hands out of my panties.”

“Ooh, kitty got a temper. Calm down killer.” He spat a rusty mouthful of tobacco juice on the blacktop and just missed my boots. He winked and moved on to the next soldier.

Soldiers concealed contraband in private areas of their bodies. VCR tapes of porn found a way on the television screen in the break area. I eavesdropped on movies from my spot under the bed while I waited between tower rotations. The movies made me sick, reminding me of that night when I heard my first porn while passed out on Sergeant Price’s couch.

Men carried alibi M16 rounds in the worst of places. The extra rounds were for shooting rabbits. Rabbits were shot for sport and to keep the little critters from tripping alarms. A nearby rifle range camouflaged the noise, and leadership turned a blind eye. Bagging rabbits earned platoon bragging rights and rated right up there with bar brawls and gang-bangs.

It was tricky securing extra ammunition. Alibi rounds were unaccounted for, mistakes made when loading magazines. I climbed my tower, emptied magazines and counted the rounds. When I found extra, I stashed them away, but not for the reason the men saved rounds. I loved animals too much to kill a rabbit. I stockpiled rounds in the false bottom of my wall locker and prepared for an emergency I had not yet imagined.

Other than my little alien, I carried no contraband. I carried nothing to distract me from duty. I carried no reading materials, no crossword puzzles, and no gadgets to take my mind off the hours of solitude. I didn't need material things in my cubical in the sky.

I carried an active imagination, an ability to escape through day dream and fantasy. Sometimes I fantasized about pleasant things, and sometimes I fantasized about killing Sergeant Alder or killing fellow soldiers.

I listened to the hushed sounds of the forest and relaxed in the peace of my tower. Time alone in my own mind seemed like a mini vacation. Some soldiers hated the solitude. Silence wreaked havoc on the mind. That's what happened to Aceball, I'll bet. I never met Aceball. He was sent to a psyche ward a few months before I arrived.

I never got the whole story but gleaned enough to formulate a scenario in my head. Aceball worked a tower shift when he snapped. Something spooked him. He didn't radio the command to inquire. Instead, he pulled up his machine gun and let her rock-n-roll. He pumped rounds, plinking out windows from the 619th barracks. Base Command ordered a cease fire, but he continued to throw down lead, ignoring the radio. His sergeant jumped in a jeep and rushed to the tower. Aceball fired up the vehicle but let the Sergeant run for cover. Eventually, he ran out of ammo.

Fellow platoon mates took him into custody. He hurt no one, not even his sergeant. Aceball must have been a horrible shot. After a short stay at an Army hospital in Kaiserslautern, he received a medical discharge. According to rumor, Aceball returned home, kicked back somewhere in upstate New York, and lived on a fat disability check. He was a hero on the hill, another legend.

No one talked about possible motives. No one mentioned drugs, alcohol, disciplinary problems, or troubles with women. No one debated if he mentally lost his shit or planned the whole thing, and no one kept in contact. I wondered if he actually went home or went to prison. I thought about shooting up the place too, how I would turn Sergeant Alder into a human-colander, perfect for straining bloated macaroni from a daily overdose of chow hall chili-mac.

I drifted into a sweeter daydream, the one where I'm the longhaired, storybook princess, Rapunzel, waiting for her prince. In my fantasy, the prince claimed paternity over the alien, and I allowed him. We escaped from the tower in a flurry of wedding plans and the determination to live happily ever after. A flutter in my abdomen jolted me back to reality. I patted my stomach, my alien, and scolded myself for being ridiculous. I was nobody's princess. Prince Charming types and white knights passed by tower rats like me.

I thought about my boyfriend, Steve. He was not the father of my baby and certainly not a prince, but sometimes he tried. He once hitch-hiked thirty miles to the closest taco stand during one of my Mexican food cravings. That was something to hold on to.

I sank into fantasy, restructuring Steve's words and smoothing out brash behavior. I repeated empty promises out loud until I believed him. About mid-fantasy, the whooping siren of a base-wide alert popped me back into reality.

Alerts were dreamlike and chaotic, occurring anytime, day or night, seven days a week, no break for holidays, religious or otherwise. When a wire or sensor tripped, the entire post locked down. Military police and ordinance troops reported. That accounted for most of the posts inhabitants. The barracks, gym, and bar emptied as bodies rushed to the armory. The

armorer threw weapons, magazine cartridges and ammunition into a hallway. Drunk, sober, in pajamas or street clothes, soldiers rushed the hill and took up positions.

An alert never felt totally real unless you stood in one of the towers. The alarm never seemed false when you were a tower rat. The life expectancy of a tower rat during an actual attack was estimated at eight seconds. I didn't question the accuracy of the eight seconds or the manner calculated. I lived the fact as my truth. It made sense to me. Tower rats held a birds-eye view, maintained radio communications, packed personal weapons and operated mounted M60 machine guns.

My heart sank to my stomach and thumped. I stood in the tower and counted down the seconds of my life. I counted life like I counted down the seconds before rushing a quarterback in a game of flag-football.

I gripped the railing at the top of the stairs and tried to lose myself in the game. "One-alligator, two-alligator." Time dragged. Thoughts and images flashed, like the time I wrecked my white Ford Pinto while passing the school bus during my senior year. I had so much time to react. "Turn into the skid," Dad's voice commanded as the Pinto slid out of control, but Dad wasn't in the car. I pulled the Pinto from a near perfect donut cut on an icy switchback and stuck an impossible landing in a rocky ditch. The gas tank suffered a puncture and the chrome stripping on the passenger's door caught slivers from a dangerous kiss with a telephone pole. After a week in the shop and a week of restriction, the Pinto and I were back on the road, undaunted.

Eight seconds seems like a long time when it's your last eight seconds. "Three-alligator, four-alligator." Should I jump? I think I should jump. I don't want to die in this tower.

“Five-alligator, six-alligator.” What will they tell my mom? Probably some shit about a training accident – cover everything up. Fucking Army.

“Seven-alligator.” Aren’t you going to jump? Nah. Going to get behind my M60. Time to rock-n-roll.

“Se-ven-and-a-half-al-li-ga-tor – se-ven-and-a-three-quar-ter-al-li-ga-tor – eight-alligator.” Hmm, not dead yet. Probably just another rabbit.

False alarm. The radio quieted. My legs grew tired of standing. A bar stool situated behind my M60 mount would have been perfect, but sitting was prohibited. I sat on the floor sometimes, but sitting made me nervous. Unable to view my whole zone, my imagination got the best of me. I heard twigs snapping and footsteps approaching. I got all worked up, locked and loaded my M16, and jumped to my feet ready for a fight. Maybe that’s what happened to Aceball. I preferred standing.

Performing a field-expedient manicure, I pushed back cuticles with an alibi M16 round, and never thought to be concerned about jamming the lead tip into my skin or poisoning the alien. Bored and marking time, I pushed at the ring finger cuticle of my firing hand when the siren whooped again. I scrambled about the tower securing gear. I grabbed my Kevlar helmet, snapped the chinstrap, pulled a magazine from an ammo pouch and slid it into the well. I scanned my clear zone and counted down the alligators, my last seconds of life, for the second time that day.

In the morning we marched off the hill, replaced by another platoon of tower rats. Exhausted, I headed to my room. I unsnap my load bearing equipment belt and let the gear slide from shoulders on to the tiled floor of my barracks room. I sat on the edge of my narrow

bunk, unlaced my combat boots, wrestled from the tired uniform, and slipped into flannel pajamas.

I freed my hair from pinned up braids and eased my head onto the pillow. I quieted my breathing and smiled at the swoop of a roller-coaster and the beating wings of butterflies. I adjusted my pajamas and scrutinized a bump gliding beneath my skin and across my belly. I poked at the little foot and hoped my alien never had to learn how to count down the last seconds of his life.

My plans for Steve grew larger than the big-boyfriend as security guard role. I decided Steve would serve as my baby's daddy. Biologically, I was too late, but with training and manipulation, I figured he was up to the task.

Steve acted loving toward me when we were alone, separated from our Army buddies. He held my hand, talked about marriage and our future, and rubbed my belly in public. He liked pretending the baby growing inside me belonged to him, even though we both knew better. He behaved differently back on post, but so did everyone. Desperate for a boyfriend, for protection from the others, and for some sort of façade legitimacy to explain away an unplanned pregnancy, I accepted his cruelties.

In 1986, nice girls from Molalla, Oregon didn't go around getting knocked up without getting married. Nice girls did get knocked up but before the belly rounded, hasty marital plans moved into action. White weddings provided an illusion of intactness. I longed for intactness but grimaced at the irony. I wanted to find a husband in order to cover up the pregnancy. I achieved the exact thing I tried to escape when I first joined the Army. I was a long way from

home, stationed in Germany, but I'd return to Molalla one day. I needed a man, no matter how vile.

It's kind of like prison mentality, but Steve made a good bodyguard. Once we started dating, I rarely worried about harassment or sexual assault. He took care of these things. He weighed 220 pounds and stood six-foot-five, a big Italian boy from a firefighting family. A hero lived inside of him. Somehow I knew this, but he needed to grow up first.

We sat in the bar on post one evening enjoying a local band. His platoon and my platoon were off duty but restricted to post. The place was packed. I wore his high school sweatshirt to camouflage the bump growing in my stomach. I kept the pregnancy a secret for as long as possible to protect myself from public ridicule. Rounding month six, I still fit my uniform and performed regular duties. Only Steve and my girlfriend, Mo, shared the secret.

Steve passed out scraps of torn notebook paper and a few pens, instructing soldiers to print their names on paper for a drawing. He later collected the scraps in a red Folger's coffee can. No one knew anything about a drawing or a prize. He stood on a table and announced the drawing. He tipped the can down for me to pick a winner. I handed a folded paper up to him. The band performed a complimentary drum roll, and Steve announced, "The father of Christine's baby is Spike Kelly! Congratulations Spike! The bitch and brat are now yours."

Everyone cheered and bought Spike shots. Spike Kelly laughed and enjoyed the undeserved attention. He and I never slept together. I walked back to the barracks room, too humiliated for tears. Spike and Steve showed up at the window singing Irish pubs songs around three in the morning. Spike was Irish. He sang lots of songs, and his dad owned a pub in upstate New York.

Spike yelled. "Hey, Betty Boop, you awake?"

"Fuck you guys."

Steve crooned. "Yo Baby, don't be upset."

"C'mon Boop, he's jus drunk. He don't mean nothing."

"No, Spike. He ain't coming up."

Steve sang to me. "Yo, Baby, Yo Baby. I sorry, Baby..."

The nighttime duty officer knocked on my door. He threatened to call the K-9 unit on my window guests. The dog handlers policed up intoxicated soldiers, never a pretty sight. I opened the window all the way and shook my head as two drunken boys clambered up to visit a reluctant damsel in distress.

Once through the window, Spike puked in the trash can. "Congratulations on the wee one," he patted my tummy before sliding down on the blue throw rug in front of my bunk. I covered him up with my sleeping bag.

Steve sat at the foot of my small bed. He held his head down and stuck out his lower lip like a king-size toddler. A single tear illuminated by the moon rolled down his cheek.

"What's your problem?"

"I'm a dick."

"Yup."

"Forgive me?"

"Why? You'll do it again."

"I'm never mean to you."

“How about last time? When you took a picture of me sound asleep with Cole’s dick on my lips?”

Steve laughed. “Looked like you were really sucking cock.”

“Real funny. Especially after you passed the picture around.”

“It was funny. Just a joke.”

“Funny for you and the guys, but horrible for me.”

“I’m a dick.”

“Yeah, now go to sleep.”

Steve and I snuck off post the next morning. It was his idea, an apology, and a chance to spend a day and evening together away from the depot and away from Army buddies. Steve blamed his poor behavior on the frustration and hatred he held for his life on post. The place brought the worst out in everyone. I was no exception.

We hitched a ride, hiding in the back of a covered pick-up truck driven by a cook on a supply run to Kaiserslautern. The cook dropped us along the roadway outside the little village of Kirchheimbolanden. We hiked into the village and selected a guest house near the train station. I blushed when Steve asked for the best room for his beautiful Frau, pretending we were married.

Like something out of a romance novel, Steve acted like the hero I needed him to be. We shared dinner in the candlelight of a pizzeria before strolling cobblestone streets. A golden moon shined, and summer breeze blew, carrying a hint of rose.

Steve draped a strong arm around my shoulders and pulled me close as we entered a park darkened by a thick canopy of leaves. Lush ivy blanketed lofty garden walls and crept along

a path edging the pond. Crickets chirped, and bullfrogs belched low notes from beneath spindles of cattails. A patina green statue of a goddess offered a cornucopia of fruit. Alabaster angels raised hands to heaven and spread feathered wings. Larger than life figures cast long, haunting shadows stretching across the open grass.

Steve pulled me close. "Ooh, spooky. Huh?"

"Totally creepy."

"Wanna go back?"

"No, I'm safe with you."

"Right. No one will ever hurt you. I promise."

We walked under a weeping willow near the edge of the pond and disturbed a mama duck and her babies. I jumped at her warning quack but relaxed as she waddled toward the reeds with four mottled ducklings. I slipped from Steve's arm and followed Mama and her ducklings to the water's edge. As the last of the little ones splashed in, Steve let out a horrified shriek.

I returned to the path, but he screamed and ran away. He screamed louder, thrashing arms in the air, and flapping what looked like wings. Steve ran the loop of the pond, his wings stretched out like an alabaster angel ready to ascend to heaven. He dropped to the grass and rolled. Stop, drop, and roll. I listened to screams and squawks. The screams came from Steve, but the squawks sounded inhuman.

Steve lay in the grass, panting. The shadows produced a peacock. The bird shook his head, ruffled his feathers, strutted up the path, and hopped back up in the willow to sit next to his hen. I reached Steve and dropped next to him in the grass. We laughed until I cried.

"You make a beautiful Angel."

"What made that fucking bird attack?"

"We walked under his tree."

"He ought to learn to bark or something."

We stayed on our backs for a while, both out of breath, me from laughing too hard, Steve from fighting a peacock. We gazed at stars, giggled, and held hands.

"Did I really look like an angel?"

"A big, clumsy one, but yeah."

"I'm your angel, your guardian angel."

"Oh brother."

"You'll see. We'll get out of here one day."

"And then what?"

"I'm going to be a fireman."

"Yeah?"

"We'll get married, and I'll be your baby's daddy."

"Think so?"

"You'll see. Wait and see."

By the end of September, Steve and I lived together in an A-frame cottage just outside of Kirchheimbolanden. We continued to talk of marriage and planned to take care of matters after the baby arrived. Steve received orders to Fort Ritchie, Maryland and left Kriegsfeld in early November. I never felt more alone and desperate. I failed to snare a baby-daddy.

Life went on without Steve. Harassment resumed in his absence, despite my growing belly. Evidently, late term pregnancy was a turn-on.

I continued to work until The Red Cross contacted me days before Thanksgiving. My grandpa suffered a brief battle with bone cancer and wanted to see me before he died. I understood airlines made rules regarding pregnancy and flying, but I didn't investigate. I packed my bag and left Kriegsfeld Army Depot and planned never to return.

The journey from Germany to Portland International Airport lasted nearly forty-eight hours. Despite the bulging belly stuffed in cramped airplane seats, I suffered no discomfort. Flight attendants fussed over me, requesting my due date. I gave vague answers, and I lied.

The best guess was eight months, but maybe more like seven, seven and a half, or even eight and a half. Regular menses stopped in boot camp, a common occurrence for female soldiers during times of extreme stress. My cycle failed to restart once I started work at Kriegsfeld. I didn't miss the cycles and only expected a problem when hit with violent morning sickness.

I experienced nothing related to human birth but relied on my history of animal husbandry and midwifery skills. I grew up on a farm and played nanny to piglets, calves, colts, lambs, and even helped a few chicks escape from shells. There was hardly a time in my childhood that I wasn't waking up in the middle of the night to give an orphaned animal a bottle or re-swaddle a squirming runt sleeping at the foot of my bed. I knew much about baby animals but little about baby humans. Even still, I thought I had things under control.

I provided my own prenatal care, filling the mini fridge in my barracks with milk, hot dogs, pickles, and chocolaty Hostess Ho-Hos. An open sewer trench next to the chow-hall made

me wretch in the mornings. It wasn't much better during lunch or dinner time, so I ate in my room.

I put down mixing bowls of crunch-berry cereal for breakfast and lived on pickles, cold hotdogs, and potato chips in the evenings. Every night before bed, I treated myself to one or six Ho-Hos. The rolled cake and cream wrapped in foil became ritual. First, I removed the wrapping, smooshing the foil in a tight ball. I scraped the chocolate coating off with my front teeth, unrolled the jellyroll, and licked the cream. I rerolled the cake, dipped it in milk, and enjoyed. With my teenager metabolism still intact, I managed to stay in my original uniform until late in the seventh month. Or was it the eighth?

My mother and sister met me at Portland airport with hugs and belly pats. I didn't expect to see my father. He refused contact after the phone call I made from Germany, the one where I told him about Nicholas. He wanted nothing to do with me. I served living proof of his conviction that only sluts, dykes, and women far too ugly to catch a man joined the Army.

I knew the gender and name of the baby almost in tandem with my knowledge of the pregnancy. At thirteen, I owned a horse named Niki. I delivered her foal, reaching my hand inside her womb. Armpit deep in muck, I poked around and found him. I found his behind and slid my hand down his legs and up again to his rear. I tried to turn him, but his body parts slipped from my hand. I slid in the other hand, armpit deep, with my chin resting on Niki's backside. I got a grip and started manipulations to right a wrong. I touched his head, moved my hands across his shoulders, and grabbed under his armpits. I pulled out the colt named Nicholas.

Mom drove straight to the hospital from the airport. I expected to go home first, to take a shower and mentally prepare for the visit. I pulled at Steve's high school sweatshirt as we walked down the hospital corridor. I hoped to stretch it out and make the pregnancy less obvious to my grandfather. I entered his room, using my sister to shield my appearance. He called me close and patted my stomach. "Fat and sassy. Any day now. She'll calve any day."

Ronda and I laughed. Grandpa raised Angus beef cattle. We lived and worked on the family farm, and spent our lives being compared to hogs and cattle. Grandpa called us, "good-looking heifers." Believe it or not, heifer was a term of endearment.

Grandpa acted in good spirits. I half expected him to tell one of his chicken jokes. Grandpa told only four jokes. All four involved chickens. To conserve his energy, we kept the visit short. I promised to return in the morning, but he died an hour later. I went into labor, false labor.

After Grandpa's funeral, my father broke the silence and narrowed the growing gap in our relationship. We never talked about his disappointment or about the pregnancy. He handed me a comic book, *Egbert the Embryo*. "I gave this to your mama when we were expecting little Irv." Little Irv was my dead big brother. He died of leukemia before my eighth birthday.

Cartoons in black and white filled the yellowing pages. Sketches detailed Egbert's life in the womb and journey into the world. This was my first pregnancy book. Choked up by an artifact from the birth of my deceased brother, I only managed a nod. Dad nodded back and gently punched me in the arm.

I managed to make it home from Germany in the final trimester of pregnancy, but false labor prevented my return. The fake labor wasn't a ploy, but it served in my strategy to never return to Kriegsfeld. Germany had become my nightmare.

Life's pace with a baby eased dark memories. I blocked out people and places, and concentrated on mothering. I took maternity leave on the family farm but did not waste away the six weeks of recovery time in ignorant bliss. Instead, I read up on Army policies, sought legal counsel, and devised a plan to stay away from Germany. I secured temporary assignment with Steve at Fort Richie, Maryland, and waited approval for a compassionate reassignment. The term, *compassionate reassignment* is a reassignment based on hardship circumstances. Kriegsfeld Army depot was a remote location with no family housing, no daycare facilities, no public transportation, and a duty rotation of twenty-four hours on and twenty-four hours off. These factors created hardship for any parent, single or married.

Steve's commander agreed to accept me and initiate the transfer paperwork after conferring with Steve. The commander asked Steve if the baby was his and if so, did he plan to marry me and support his family. Steve answered yes to all questions.

Fully recovered and motivated to get back to work, I felt hopeful about my new station with family amenities, manageable duty shifts, and supportive leadership. The next step involved permissive release from the overseas commander, Captain Goode. I stood at the position of attention in front of Steve's commander, as he made telephone contact with Captain Goode. The two commanders talked of benign things at first, the weather, officers' academy, and previous duty stations. Rapport piped through the speaker phone and gave me hope. The conversation shifted to a certain Private with a new baby.

“You tell the little bitch to ditch the kid, pack her shit, and get her ass on a plane,” said Captain Goode.

The call ended. The compassionate reassignment relied on the compassion of Captain Goode. He showed none. I don’t know why I expected more.

My plan failed. With no more tricks up my sleeve, I faced two choices. I could leave the baby with my folks and return to Germany, or end my enlistment on a hardship discharge. I ended my first enlistment and transferred to reserve status. I would return to active duty in the future, but I’d never return to Captain Good and his hell-hole of a command.

Chapter Three: Weekend Warrior

I left Fort Richie, Maryland on April Fools' Day in 1987 with a hardship discharge, severance pay, the Montgomery GI Bill, and a transfer to the Army Reserve. I enrolled in a business college and waited for Steve's final tour to end. After he completed his enlistment, I quit school and moved to his hometown in Washington State. Life with Steve wasn't much better than it was in Germany. As promised, we married. I think he tried to be a daddy, but it just wouldn't stick. Mostly, he lounged on the sofa and grew fat and angry.

Since Steve came from a family of firefighters, he viewed firefighting as his birthright occupation. He snubbed ordinary labor. His dad served as town fire chief, and I worked at town hall, billing and collecting utilities. Steve stayed on the couch, and I supported our family.

Fights grew uglier as the 1988 Dukakis/Bush election drew near. Steve's family belonged to the Democratic Party and insisted I comply. I failed to comply. It was my first voting opportunity, and I knew nothing of politics, cared for no party, but refused to elect a president sporting a uni-brow. Shallow? Yeah, I was twenty-one.

I worked late on Election Day. I didn't have time to vote before picking up Nicholas at daycare. Once home, Steve refused to let me leave the house. I wasn't allowed to vote.

I chopped onions, thought about the election, fingered the voter registration card in my jeans, and cried. Damn onions. I planned my escape. I'd finish the sauce, feed the asshole his supper, pretend the baby needed diapers, and slip out. I would vote. The plan seemed perfect.

I stared out a window in my single wide mobile home, a newer model, with two bedrooms, a bathroom, a matching washer and dryer, and a sunny kitchen. I bought the place

by myself and enjoyed a sense of accomplishment, but the home served as a prison too. I hated the confinement and hated being controlled by Steve.

Baby Nicholas played under the dining table, stacking a rainbow of plastic donuts on a blue post. Steve's six-foot-four body overflowed the sofa, as he scanned job ads for firefighter openings. Ground beef and garlic simmered, filling the air with false comfort.

Steve smelled onions and complained. "I hate onions. Why can't you make sauce like my mom?" His Italian family used no vegetables in spaghetti with meat sauce. As his new bride, I failed to comply.

"Pick them out."

"Make it like my mother."

"Go live with your mother."

He picked up the phone and called Dominos. "Yeah, yeah, space sixty-seven, fucking wife can't cook." He laughed and hung up the phone. I glared. Dominos delivered to space sixty-seven often.

Rage pulsed in time with the ticking clock. Polls would close in two hours. I made my move. "Honey, can you babysit Nick, while I run for diapers?"

"Don't bullshit me. You're sneaking out to vote."

"Voting is my right."

"Not when you vote like a dumb bitch. You ain't leaving."

"You don't know who I'm voting for. Maybe I changed my mind." I softened my tone to avoid a fight and tucked keys in my pocket. I could out run him, but not with Nick on my hip. I

changed the subject, asking him about job openings. The mood calmed. I turned off the stove, rinsed the cutting board and knife, and grabbed a dishtowel.

“Who would you vote for?” Steve asked.

“Bush.”

“Dumb fucking cu...” He jumped off the sofa, and ran down the hall before the “unt” of “cunt” escaped his lips.

Steve ran. I chased. It was a natural reaction, primordial, except I clutched a ten-inch chef’s knife. The thrill of the chase pulsed through my veins. Down the narrow hallway, past my matching washer and dryer, I admired his agility. He cut a corner into the bathroom and slammed the hollow-cored door. Click.

I stabbed and pulled, stabbed and pulled. I never imagined the simplicity. The knife glided through thin veneer panels. I sank the blade to the hilt and sawed. Steve screamed. I laughed.

I recognized a familiar scraping sound. He opened the sliding window over the bathtub. His tennis shoes squeaked, struggling for traction against the glossy white tub surround. I imagined his fat ass squeezing through the tiny window, and I howled. My laughter scared him. He screamed more. I laughed more. “Call 911, call 911, the bitch is gonna kill me.”

Blue lights flashed. Cops knocked on my door, the same cops I worked with at town hall. Steve found refuge with a neighbor. Free from handcuffs, I climbed into the back of a patrol car. Nicholas smiled as I latched his seatbelt. My father-in-law met us at the station. He put on a big smile for the Nick, but glared at me in disgust. His glare said, “Dumb fucking cunt.”

I received escort to the polls in a police cruiser. I slid a blue privacy curtain across my booth, safeguarding my identity. I read the ballot, every word. I casted my vote, my first ever vote, and cried. I failed to comply. I knew I wasn't dumb, and I refused to be anyone's fucking cunt.

I'd like to say that my marriage ended shortly after the election, but it didn't. Steve and I fought it out for a couple more years. I played soldier in the Army Reserves one weekend per month. On non-drill weekends, I fixed up our new home, a dilapidated house set on beautiful acreage. We planned to build something much bigger and further from the road, but for the time being, it's all we had. There was so much work that needed done to make the place livable. I split and sold firewood to help with improvements and to save money for a new washer and dryer.

Once Steve scored a job with the fire department, we knew our marriage would survive. We were wrong. On a vacation from work, Steve stole the washer and dryer money and took off to Disneyland with his sister and a carload of girls from her sorority. I had never visited Disneyland, but dreamed of taking Nicholas one day. I also dreamed of a washer and dryer. Neither dream would come true in this marriage. I was done.

I went to work in another town. Steve kept the house. Nick and I struggled to keep an apartment. Nick enrolled in kindergarten. I took community college classes, washed windows, waited tables, and stuck it out in the Army Reserve. I requested extra military duty, attended trainings, and volunteered for missions to build rank and increase monthly pay. It worked. We survived.

I petitioned for drill sergeant school and was selected. Graduation meant advancement, and advancement meant larger paycheck and opportunities for temporary, stateside duty during Operation Desert Storm. It was a longshot, but I went for it.

Imagine me, Private Betty Boop, cartoon soldier turned drill sergeant. Odds were not in my favor for this ridiculous plan. My old nickname no longer haunted me, but the same challenges did. I lacked military bearing, struggled to make a bed, sucked at marching and fought fly-away hair. I barely met standards, hanging on academic probation until the curriculum shifted to rifle-bayonet training. Just like in boot camp, it was my shot to shine.

I fought challengers from the female platoons. I fought out for relief. I fought my inner-rage, and fought out of fear. I beat other women and fought the male champion in an exhibition match. My speed and strength failed to overcome his twelve-inch height advantage. I threw slashes, butt-strokes, and thrusts. He blocked.

He looked like a giant boy, too soft to be in the Army, too sweet to hurt a girl. My baby-faced opponent landed half-hearted swings, while the male soldiers chanted, "Kick her ass. Kick her ass."

He refused to knock me down, even though he was capable. His charity and reluctance humiliated me, prolonging the inevitable, but I understood. He hated fighting a woman. A battle of the sexes decided a long time ago, I lost by default.

He wrapped a long arm around my shoulder as we walked away. "Come on. I'll buy the first round."

We shared a few beers. One thing led to another, as often is the case when commingling beer, testosterone, weapons, and co-ed training. My first post-divorce love affair was sparked

by battle, but burned hotter than any make-up sex with Steve. His eyes were dark blue, and I think his name was Derek.

Nothing came of the pugil-stick fling, and for the most part, that was okay. My short time with Derek eased the pain of divorce, but I felt a void once we parted. I mistook the void for the need of a man. I returned home to my Army Reserve unit and fell into a relationship with a part-time soldier and full-time engineer named, Mike.

Mike was my first serious boyfriend after the divorce. Compared to me, he seemed accomplished. He drove a burgundy Acura Integra, rented a skyscraper-view apartment in Magnolia and helped design the Sonicare toothbrush. I drove a beat up Datsun Honeybee, lived on the flood plains of a small farming community, and scraped by as a part-time student, part-time waitress, part-time soldier, and full-time mother to Nicholas. Mike's proposal to step up the relationship to cohabitation eased financial burden and opened the door to enrollment in Seattle's leading culinary arts program. I jumped at the chance.

Life with Mike flowed at first. We took Nicholas to the zoo, walked in parks, and ate supper with his folks on Sundays. When we fought, it was over Nicholas. Six-year-old boys wreak havoc on bachelor belongings. I refereed, kept a watchful eye on my kid, and planned family outings to build the relationship. I enjoyed life as a full-time student, but I stuck to waiting tables and attending Army weekends to pay my fair share. I knew what people thought, but it was only half true. Mike made for a strategic partnership, but I wasn't taking advantage of his fortune.

It's hard to make friends in a large city when you're a small town girl, but I managed. I met Miki at the Loco Café in Seattle. I waited tables the day she came seeking work. She moved

to Seattle from Denver, taking a job in a mental health facility. She wanted part-time work with ordinary people. I thought the staff and customers from the Loco Café were anything but ordinary. The kitchen staff travelled in a grunge band from New York, transplants following the Seattle music scene. A gay man from Belgium served as head chef. One waitress stripped fulltime. Our customers were Seattle's bankers and brokers tucked into the old-money neighborhood of Magnolia.

Miki and I didn't have much in common. She leaned toward anti-establishment, disliked the military, and hated my live-in boyfriend. Miki pegged Mike as a total dickhead. I failed to realize it at the time.

I told Miki about the pregnancy first. "He's gonna dump you," she said.

"Nah, he loves me, loves Nick."

"Mike loves Mike, and your cooking, cleaning, and free sex."

"You got him wrong."

I figured Mike and I just needed to grow our relationship and spend more time alone together. His mother looked after Nicholas like he was her grandson. This freed Mike and I up for dates, and military weekends. Mike and I were not in the same unit, but we drilled on the same dates, and each volunteered for extended duty. Collecting rank was as important to him as it was for me.

In the spring of 1993, Mike and I attended a field exercise in the woods on Fort Lewis, Washington. The exercise was meant to be instructional, but it was more like camping. We played combat-related games like capture the flag. Once at the bivouac site, Mike and I parted

ways. I joined my platoon, and Mike joined his. We were no longer a couple. Instead, we were enemy combatants, each after the other's platoon colors.

In my platoon's camp, Walt and I dug a foxhole to share. We dug by the book, the Soldier's Manual. We used our M16s aligned butt to barrel to measure the length, and used two Kevlar helmets to measure the width. I fudged a little on the width by adding extra inches to accommodate a comfy sleep. Depth depended on average height. Deep was essential, but not too deep, about armpit high seemed perfect for firing in supported prone. Walt and I were the same height, 5'6 – a little short for a man, but above-average for a woman.

Walt liked pairing up as my battle buddy, and I liked hanging out with Walt. He never flirted, never tried any funny stuff. He stuck to business, friendly but professional, a gentleman soldier.

In training events like this one, Walt readily volunteered to be the guy stuck with the only female in the platoon. For the first time, gender wasn't an obstacle, not with Walt, not with my commander, and not with most of the other men. If anything, being female improved my operational popularity. I didn't take up much space, didn't snore, fart, or burp, making me pleasant to sleep near.

As a skilled trencher and creative gardener, I thought of the foxhole as more than a secured fighting position. The hole served as a temporary home, at least for a few nights. We prepared for rain and battle. We built up the sides with dirt fortified by rock. The fortification supported a log roof covered with earth and camouflaged with replanted sword ferns, blackberry brambles, shrubs, and moss. The berm appeared natural, and the position remained undetectable until kneeling in front and lifting a curtain of foliage. We took turns running over

the top of the roof. Bits of soil sifted through log rafters and dusted my braids as Walt jumped up and down on the mound to test the strength.

We felt secure, free from possible apprehension in the evening's mock battle of capture the flag. I loved playing the game, skulking around the dark forest, creeping up on competing enemy platoons, slashing throats with a red sharpie marker, and stealing platoon colors.

We climbed in to wait for night. The digging wore me out, and I rested my head on Walt's shoulder. We stayed quiet until he whispered. "Can I ask a personal question?"

"Depends on the question."

"Don't be mad. You're not fat or anything, but are you pregnant?"

"How the hell did you know?"

"Fatherly intuition. Swear to God. I knew the exact moment my wife conceived both girls."

"Incredible. I'm under two months."

"Does Mike know?"

"Yeah. I showed him the pee stick last week."

"You guys getting married?"

"Think so. He's kind of freaked out."

"He'll be fine. First one scared the crap out of me too."

We sat in silence and fumbled with our night vision goggles. Our captain smuggled eight pairs to the training site, one for each member of our platoon. Night vision gave us an enormous but unfair advantage. I giggled in anticipation, like waiting to test out a new toy. We were Army Reservists, weekend warriors. Walt handled insurance claims in his real life, and I

went to school and waited tables. The excitement of battle, a razor-sharp contrast to the doldrums of civilian life, pulsed in our veins.

Once the dark crept in, Walt took the first recon while I stayed back to guard the perimeter. He returned in an hour, reporting the locations and even the fighting positions of two enemy platoons. He found Mike's platoon. They hadn't dug in, opting to conserve energy in order to stay awake all night.

I worried about Mike. He only packed a poncho liner for warmth and a rope hammock to keep him off the ground. I volunteered the next run.

I followed coordinates to Mike's camp. I skulked along adjusting to the distortions of night vision and practicing stealth. Mike was my live-in boyfriend and father of my baby, but only during the light. At night, he and his platoon mates were the enemy.

I heard Mike's teeth chatter before finding his body in the dark. He appeared fuzzy and green through my goggles. I examined the angles of his square head, square jawline, and square shoulders topping the sharp triangle of his torso. His geometry remained crisp even in the blur of night vision. He sat on a large log, soaking wet, and miserable. He held tight to a makeshift flagpole, a tree branch, bearing platoon colors. I scanned the area for others and found no one.

My goggles distorted depth perception. I removed them to get an idea of distance. Without goggles, Mike disappeared into the dark, but I located the faint outline of the log. The log seemed close, approximately fifteen feet. I slid the goggles in my backpack and pulled out a poncho liner. Mike heard the movement and whispered. "Hey, who's out there?"

"Hey, Babe."

"Honey Bear, what are you are doing?"

“Brought you my poncho liner. You cold?”

“Crazy girl, I’m freezing. Come here.”

“You gonna kill me?” I referred to the felt-pen weapons we kept.

“Of course not.”

“You promise?”

“Honey Bear, I promise. Get over here before you get caught.”

I moved closer. I heard the click of his pen cap. Betrayal gushed from an inner wound dousing the warmth of maternal energy. The dark olive liner camouflaged my movements. I bit down on my pen and rushed his shadowed silhouette. We toppled off the log and landed in a patch of tall sword ferns. My weight crashed on his chest and knocked the wind out of him. He was stunned as I slashed his throat with red and ripped his platoon flag from the branch.

He gasped and tried to yell for help but couldn’t catch his breath. He managed to whisper, “Honey Bear, you fucking bitch.” I slipped out of direct sight, secured my goggles, and ran back to camp.

Walt and I were a solid team, deadly even, in our make-belief war. We scored two flags during the night. Our throats were marker-free and intact.

In the morning, we strutted into the mess tent for hot chow. A waft of buttered flapjacks and warmed maple syrup hovered beneath musty olive canvas. I wore Mike’s colors on my head like a kerchief and fashioned a do-rag on Walt’s head from the other flag. We sat next to Mike’s platoon, a huddled pack of shivering wet dogs wearing red felt-marker collars.

In the truce of daylight, Mike remained short on words. Anger hardened like concrete in his squared jaw. I was still his enemy. He pulled a draw from his coffee cup and glared. “Honey Bear, you fucking bitch.

Mike and I argued the whole drive from Fort Lewis to Seattle. I couldn’t understand what he was so angry about. It was all just a game, for fun, and I had a blast.

I told Miki about the fight during my next shift at the café. It didn’t surprise her. She warned me again that Mike would dump me, and I swore she was wrong.

Miki was wrong, but only during the first months of my pregnancy. Mike and I planned a wedding and cancelled a wedding. I focused on creating a healthy baby. Miki attended childbirth classes, serving as my coach. Mike hit the gym, worked late, or hung out with friends. Miki bought childbirth books, marking up areas of particular importance with a yellow highlighter. She’d never given birth but mastered the subject. She helped set up the crib, attended doctor appointments, and emotionally supported me through the trimesters.

Nicholas and I crashed at Miki’s apartment during Mike’s tirades. I ignored the outbursts when Nicholas touched his computer, or spilled on the carpet, or left toys in the car. I wasn’t capable of ignoring physical violence. We walked on eggshells until the birth of Garret.

Three months after the birth, Mike dumped me for a blonde in accounting. I was angry, angry he waited so long, stringing us on, promising to change, creating a total hell in my household. Anger turned into shame, shame for putting my oldest son through the dramas of a spoiled man. Eventually, shame relaxed into freedom and relief. Miki moved in, life calmed down, and together we raised a baby.

Before the birth of Garret, Nick and I were more like partners in survival, rather than mother and son. After seven years of parenting, I hadn't taken my mothering practice out of fight or flight mode. The birth of a new baby and the task of raising two sons as a single mom illuminated the phenomenon. I had to get serious about my mother role.

Mothering became necessity, a practice, like accepting a role in a production. This is not to say my sons weren't loved. This also did not make me a terrible mother. I worked hard, read the recommended parenting magazines, sought mentors, and learned from mistakes, many mistakes. I prioritized, hoping to strike a balance between parenting and competing roles as student, warrior, and waitress. I attempted to put my children first, but it didn't always work out that way.

I accepted the maternal role with resistance. Although evidence of a mothering nature presented itself at an early age during my childhood, I never viewed this as a goal or an occupation. I babysat neighborhood kids for spending money, tended to my little brother, and mothered orphaned animals, but I don't recall little girl dreams of being a mommy. I owned dolls, but I didn't play mother. I played hairdresser, fashion designer, party coordinator, and collector, never the mother.

I'm sure that somewhere in my child-mind burned instinctual desires to procreate, but it wasn't obvious, not in physical manifestations. My older sister kept a *hope chest*, a cedar trunk used to collect household goods like rubber spatulas, a Betty Crocker cookbook, and parts to a china tea set, silver flatware, linens, and baby clothes, even diaper pins. I thought the idea was ridiculous and still find it hard to believe my parents purchased and filled the thing on her

adolescent and teen birthdays. Every birthday, Ronda received at least one bride-appropriate or mommy-to-be gift. I can't imagine my folks bestowing such gifts on me.

On my eighth birthday, I wanted my ears pierced, mostly so people no longer mistook me for a boy. My father and mother planned a Daisy BB gun instead. In my family, eight was the magic age for gun ownership. I wanted those earrings, aquamarines on silver studs. My mother offered a choice, pierced ears or gun ownership. I chose earrings. Crushed by my decision, my father bought me the gun anyway. To my father, I'd always be a tomboy. It didn't matter if it was my eighth birthday or my eightieth.

I was a mother before a wife. I don't suppose this is what young girls envision, or how most grown women plan, but I hadn't planned. My sons came from unions involving the wild and damaged me, interludes of sexuality, rather than the desire to procreate. This is a fact. I am neither proud nor ashamed, at least not anymore.

I needed to spend more time with my sons. I dropped out of school, quit waitressing, and landed a position cooking dinner in downtown Seattle at a Russian restaurant. It was almost what I had wanted. I wasn't quite a chef, but I was cooking to earn a living. Working nights wasn't ideal, but the schedule allowed me to parent during the day, and Miki watched the boys at night. I saved on daycare expenses, but the cooking job didn't pay well, and child support was lean for Garret and nonexistent for Nicholas. We scraped by, but I wasn't sure how long I could last.

Before my pregnancy with Garret, I was offered the chance to go back into the Army as a full-time recruiter for the Army Reserve. I turned it down for the chance to chase Mike and my cooking dreams. A few months on the dinner shift had me reconsidering. I realized a

military career seemed like the antithesis to successful parenting, but I wanted back in, back in full-time with full time pay, job security, a retirement plan, medical and dental benefits, housing, tuition assistance, and a form of camaraderie I failed to find on the outside. For a farm girl from Oregon and a single-parent, being a soldier was being all I could be.

Changes in military marital regulations took the offer off the table. Single parents were not welcome in the Army Recruiting Command. Before I could be all I could be again, I had to be somebody's wife, again. Once more, I had two choices. I could ditch the kids with my folks or find a man.

I scanned the personal ads in The Seattle Times for a candidate. I had always read the ads regardless of my marital or dating status. I read mostly for entertainment, but once in a while my eyes scanned an intriguing description. I wondered why these fabulous men were single. I wondered why I never ran into these guys when I found myself single. I circled promising candidates in red ink, picking matches for matchless friends. I passed recommendations along, usually to Miki. Nothing ever came of my labor.

Miki liked the idea of handpicking a male role model for the boys. She wasn't thrilled about my plans to reenter the military on a fulltime basis, but she helped scan. It became a favorite pastime. We were both unlucky in love, so I scanned potential soul mates for her, and she scanned for me. We held different tastes in men. She liked biker-types and broody artists. Her skin served canvass to a mass of tattoos, mostly tribal interpretations of wildlife needled black and heavy against her olive tone. She admired a well-inked man and wasn't about to entertain one of those suit-types. I didn't have a type, at least not anymore. I used to like the

clean-cut military boys, dark eyed, clean shaven, and motivated to succeed. This particular preference failed to work out in my first marriage as well as with the live-in.

I examined Miki's matches for me. Miki examined my matches for her. We were never brave enough to make contact.

After a bottle of wine shared on my twenty-seventh birthday, Miki and I stepped up the game. Together we wrote the ad: *3-for-1 deal! Funny DWF 27, with two kidlets seeking sweet family man, 25-40.* We called The Seattle Times in the morning, submitted the ad, paid extra for private messaging and mail service, and scanned the daily personals for our posting. I kept expectations low, believing no guy wanted a woman with two kids.

I went on eleven dates the first week. I squeezed in morning coffee encounters and ate lunch downtown. I met for drinks after work. And I enjoyed dinner in the Space Needle. I met men of all shapes, sizes, and ages. I learned that men well over forty lied about their age, but I enjoyed the company anyway. I typically met once before moving on to the next date. Like catch and release fishing, I reeled them in, hung out a moment, and dumped them back into the sea. So many fish, so little time. I kept a notebook, cataloging demographics, descriptions, and contact information, using smiley and frowning faces to rate the dates. I stuck to the expedition for a few months, feeding self-esteem and gaining weight from fine dining.

I agreed to meet Joe at the Virginian Café for drinks after my evening shift. Customers stayed longer than usual. I left Joe waiting at the bar for over an hour. The Virginian stood two storefronts away from my workplace in Pioneer Square. I changed from checkered pants and chef jacket into jeans and a sweater for the short commute.

Joe described himself as a red-headed bean pole. I hoped he was joking, but he spoke the truth. I observed him a moment from the street before entering the Café. He stood at the bar talking to an old man. Joe stooped to make eye contact with the old man, but even stooped he edged close to seven feet tall. Unkempt red hair brushed shoulders, and knees the size of teacup saucers poked thorough jeans covering spaghetti legs. He wore a red mustache and a weird patch of hair below his bottom lip. He was not an attractive man, but something about the way he stooped to engage an old man in conversation attracted me. Something about what I witnessed, peering through a window at him, earned a smiley face.

I dated Joe a few weeks before agreeing to meet at the zoo for a picnic dinner with my boys. Nick appeared unshaken by the absence of Mike and men in general. I wanted to keep it that way.

Nick squealed and pointed at a red-headed man approaching. "Mama, a giant!"

"He's no giant. He's my buddy, Joe."

As Joe approached, Nick jumped up and down in excitement. "A giant, a giant..."

"Shh, don't be rude." I scolded Nick while bouncing a backpack full of giggling baby Garret.

Joe extended a handshake to Nick. "Heya, little man. My name is Joe."

Nick accepted his hand in a wild shake. "You look like a tree!"

"A tree?"

The handshake led to a shimmy as Nick climbed Joe's legs and narrow torso, finding a seat on the tops of his shoulders. Nick enjoyed a birds-eye view that evening and almost every evening following in the summer of 1994.

I no longer cared about Army recruiting. I married Joe in the summer of 1994. I couldn't quit my night job, but it didn't really matter. I had Joe. I didn't marry Joe for his looks. I didn't marry him for his beat-up Volkswagen bus, and I didn't marry him for money. He had no money, but he did have a delivery job. He was Peter Pan playing family man. I married him for my lost boys. We aimed but fell short of a happily-ever-after in Neverland.

In the first months of our marriage, Joe and I never argued. He stepped right up into the role of husband and dad. He was good at it with one minor exception. Joe was always broke. We downsized into a smaller apartment, and even in tight corners, we remained happy. I never knew where Joe's money went, and it didn't really matter. I had not married a provider. I married a daddy.

The lack of arguing was refreshing. Nothing the kids or I did made Joe angry, and nothing Joe did made me angry. I wasn't even mad after he lost his only three months into the marriage. I had a back-up plan. There was always Army recruiting.

I negotiated a three-year recruiting contract on the island of Oahu, Hawaii. From a dingy, Seattle apartment, we moved into a three-bedroom house tucked in a banana jungle and overlooking Oahu's north shore. I worked long hours, but Joe and I managed morning coffee together at sunrise, a glass of wine at sunset, and weekends on the beach. Neither of us had ever lived so well. Nicholas and Garret explored the jungle, swam in the ocean, picked bananas, and chased wild chickens on our property. They lived the rural boyhood I could only once hope for.

Joe and I learned of a third baby in the summer of 1995, only five months after signing into the Honolulu Recruiting Company. I was still learning the body-snatching trade and

adjusting to a stressful schedule. My commander, a father of seven children, chastised my poor planning. “You could not have picked a worse time. Your actions are selfish and detrimental to the mission. Your career is over.”

I felt certain he had never scolded male recruiters for having children, nor had he scolded himself over the number of small faces around his dinner table. But, I held my tongue, practiced military bearing, and endured to his lecture. He was dead wrong. I had indeed picked worse times to have babies. I survived hardships, he failed to fathom. I never told him that this would be my easiest baby, a pregnancy in paradise.

Joe was destined to be a stay-at-home-husband. Finding work on the island was difficult for an outsider, but it didn’t matter. I enjoyed secure employment, a housing allowance, and full medical coverage with six weeks of paid maternity leave. To me, life never seemed sweeter. There had never been a better time to have a child.

I refused to allow pregnancy to stand in the way of mission, refused to allow the commander’s lecture to hurt me, and refused to let him be right. Army recruiting in Hawaii was different from stateside body snatching. Gender mattered, but not in the same way it did in the mainland.

Waves of matriarchy crash down on island families. Female outsiders receive warmer welcome than foreign males. High school Army candidates called me the Army Wahine, and when the baby started to show, they dropped the Army component and called me the Hapai Wahine, or pregnant woman.

There was power in pregnancy. For the second time in my ten years of service, military gender norms didn’t apply. As a female soldier, island teenagers trusted me and sought advice

and truths about military careers. As a pregnant woman, they opened their homes, introduced me to family members, and invited me to eat at their tables. I held the record for recruiting that year. I enlisted dozens, mostly young Filipinas seeking paid training and an open door into the medical field. And unlike many of my male comrades, I never needed to lie.

I read up on Hawaiian traditions surrounding pregnancy and incorporated a charming few. I ate the recommended foods like seaweed salads, octopus, squid, and sashimi. Slippery foods were thought to help the child glide out. I stood chest deep in the ocean and swayed with the waves, loosening my hips and preparing for an easy delivery. Pregnant in paradise, I enjoyed the process.

I waited a week following his birth before lowering Jaden into the sea. Instincts were intact. He paddled without fear and earned his nickname, *Baby Honu*, or sea turtle.

Parenting in Hawaii was a breeze. A diaper was the only necessity of an island infant. Besides an occasional tee-shirt or onsie, no real clothes were required. The other boys lived in board shorts, flip-flops, and tank tops. Keeping up with the laundry was simple, a task Joe volunteered to undertake. But Hawaii was expensive, and we struggled to make ends meet.

We gave up our big house on the north shore and opted for one on base near the office. I figured the free rent, and closer proximity to commissary groceries and gas would stretch our budget. But it didn't.

During a rain storm before Jaden's first birthday, I realized where our money was going. The gutters on the house overflowed. I climbed a Plumeria tree to investigate. Glass lined the gutters. I hoisted Nick up on the low roof to investigate. He pulled out an empty Seagram's bottle, and then he pulled another, and then another. Over fifty bottles dropped into the lawn.

Joe played dumb. I searched cabinets and toolboxes. I grew up with alcoholics and knew how to find a stash. My search revealed more than a dozen bottles of whiskey varying in degrees of fullness.

Of course Joe promised to quit, and of course I believed him. I grew up with drinkers, not quitters. I held an incomplete understanding of addiction. Whiskey wasn't the only vice. Marijuana was an easy purchase on the island. Joe sharpened his skills and learned to find grocery receipts to cover his booze and bud abuse.

I drank too and had a history of alcohol abuse, but my binges didn't bust a bank account. I knew Joe felt isolated and depressed on the island. I tried working fewer hours, and often came home for lunch. I trusted he was cutting back, but the real truth was I didn't have time to monitor his habits. I left Joe's recovery up to him. That was until I travelled to another Island for two days to recruit. I called home the first morning. Three-year-old Garret answered the phone.

"Hi Garret."

"Hi Mama."

"Are you being a good boy for Daddy?"

"We eat cereal."

"Great. Can I talk to Daddy."

"We eat cereal."

"Yes, Baby. Now can I talk to daddy?"

"Daddy won't wake up."

I kept Garret on the phone trying to get the next door neighbor to answer her phone. I asked Garret to wake his daddy again, but each time I got the same answer, "Daddy won't wake up." Nicholas wasn't due home from school for several hours, and I had no luck with the neighbors. I called base security and hopped a plane home.

The MP's found Joe passed out on the sofa with an empty whiskey bottle and an ashtray of butts. Garret managed to pull Jaden from the crib and remove his diaper. Naked boys sat next to the pantry eating Honeycomb cereal off the kitchen floor. It was more than the base commander could handle. We received reprimand and threat of eviction. I asked Joe's mother to come stay with us until he got his shit together. I didn't know what else to do.

In the Catholic-Mother-In-Law game of blame, I won. All the blame points belonged to me. I emasculated her son. I needed to quit the Army, trust my husband to provide, mother my sons, and support my man. I agreed to try, but not without a strategic plan.

I requested transfer to a recruiting station back in Washington State. Joe and his mother believed familial support and gainful employment hastened recovery. I left paradise for Longview, Washington. Joe enrolled in a diesel mechanic certification at the community college. The little boys shuffled off to daycare, and Nick attended junior high. Life was normal, even happy.

Joe put in long hours at school, studying for end of quarter practical exams. I felt proud of my husband and dropped by the day before finals with a box of cinnamon rolls to share with classmates. I searched the auto lab for my man. The instructor laughed when I said his name. "Joe? There ain't no Joe here. We had a Joe in the first week, but he disappeared."

I paid for a quarter's worth of full-time tuition, daycare, lunch money, cigarettes, and fuel for Joe to drive down to the river and sleep in his van. I gave Joe six weeks to get a job or get out. The next evening, he ripped phone wires from walls, kicked down a door, cracked my ribs, and stuck my head through a stained glass window. A deputy served him with a restraining order and divorce papers in jail, saving me the \$25 delivery fee.

Chapter 4: The Suicide Years

Sergeant Swan is dead. I realize this, but his voice remains etched forever in my mind. I hear him sing the National Anthem, as he did at the Portland Army Recruiting conference in 1998. He led invocation too. From his prayer and accent, I reckon he grew up Southern Baptist. He thanked Jesus several times and went on longer than Methodists I grew up around. He was a handsome man, filled out a dress-blue uniform beautifully. His radiant copper complexion glowed almost as bright as the rack of medals tacked tight to chest, decorated in Desert Storm, a real war hero. The command refused to comment on his death. Rumors trickled down through the ranks and whispered Swan's story.

Times were tough for recruiters that year. Desert Storm was all but over. War and the threat of war lured recruits. You'd think conflict had an opposite effect, but it didn't. Closet heroes lost interest in the military during quiet moments of peace. The GI Bill swelled to 90K, but failed to entice fresh meat. The Army needed 72,550 new recruits, and the demand for bodies grew. By the year 2000, the need reached 80,000. A conspiracy theorist might argue the United States Government ramped up for war, as if cognizant of a looming act of terror.

I wasn't friend to Sergeant Swan, and comrade seemed a stretch. We shared common ground. We struggled in our careers, this task to find 72,550 recruits. We held the same rank, Sergeant First Class, and were station commanders. I managed an office in Longview, Washington. He handled a spot on the Oregon side of the Columbia River. We were competitors serving on the same team, pitted against each other for bragging rights, office incentives, and promotions. We were given a mission, a body count, and expected to hit the

streets, wiggle into public and private high schools, and enlist a new generation of warriors. The job was ugly but needed done.

Mission Monday was the last Monday of every month, the last day to stuff kids in boots, and the last day to succeed before the search started again with a new calendar month and a new body count. Mission Mondays were a bitch.

Swan was going through a divorce. So was I, and so were three other recruiters in my station. There was rumor of domestic violence in his marriage, and I played the victim in marriage. His station wasn't making mission, neither was mine. Tax season magnified the stress. According to rumor, Swan asked his estranged wife to meet him on Monday at their Portland duplex to sign tax forms. This would be the last year filing as a couple, and it would be Joe and my last year filing as a couple. Mrs. Swan pulled into the cul-de-sac around noon, kept the engine running, and left two little children latched in car seats. She'd only planned to be a moment. A stroke of the pen and she'd be on her way.

Mrs. Swan bled out on the white Berber carpet, an ambush she never saw coming and probably didn't feel. Her husband slit her throat from ear to ear. Swan sat down at the kitchen table and picked up the plastic Glock-17 serving as paperweight to a mound of tax papers. He pressed the business end against his clean shaven temple and pulled the trigger. Mission Monday was over for Sergeant Swan. The car idled outside. The little children waited, orphaned.

In my mind, I see the Swan Children waiting in the car as easily as I see my own children waiting for me. My boys would stay put for a while, trying hard to behave. Nick would listen to

the radio but grow restless. Resourceful Garret would unlatch his car seat as well as baby Jaden's. The three would wander in through the front door. This image still haunts me.

Stress overcame Sergeant Swan, and he snapped. I tried to drink stress away. Sergeant Swan never drank. He hit the gym instead, building a striking body to fill out an understated coffin at a poorly attended funeral.

It started at night, a glass of wine to forget a hectic day, something to numb neurosis. I never meant for more, but the house creaked on 1930's timber and foundational bones. Coastal winds wailed a haunting lullaby. Douglas fir and Western hemlock stretched menacing shadows across my two-story millworker's cottage. It was a small place, built in stages as the deed transferred from one laboring soul to the next.

The local sawmill was gone. So were the lumbermen and most of the loggers. The last owners of the house, Johnny and Lorraine, faced foreclosure after the mill died. Property tax records whispered their secret. I never met the couple, but I thought of them when I latched the living room window. The living area, the last room added to the eight-hundred square foot house, was built by them. The rustic addition slapped up along an exterior wall and boasted an interior of old cedar shingles once belonging to the outside of the house. The rough-cut cedar window sill served as a testament to their devotion. "Johnny & Lorraine forever," cut in cursive with a router bit adorned the silvering sill. They planned to live together in the house *forever*.

My second divorce finalized shortly after I purchased Johnny and Lorraine's forever-home. At age thirty-one and a two-time survivor of divorce war, *forever* seemed a far-fetched fantasy. The window sill gave me hope and made me lonely at the same time.

I checked the latch nightly, pausing to run my index finger through the router grooves, tracing the names of Johnny and Lorraine. After my three little boys shuffled off to bed, I visited each entry point before climbing the narrow stairway to join them. The routine became obsession. Once per night was no longer enough. I checked seven to ten times, retracing my steps into the early morning.

A glass of wine eased tension. A whole bottle calmed nerves. Two bottles coaxed sleep. I woke with a pounding head. Red wine hangovers were the worst. I stumbled downstairs to the kitchen and ransacked the cupboard for saltine crackers. I stuffed two crackers in my mouth, accidentally inhaling. Wheezing, I grabbed vodka from the freezer and a jug of V-8 from the fridge. A long pull straight from the vodka bottle clobbered the dry tickle in my throat. I chased with a chug of V-8.

“Busted!” said Nick, “Bad manners, Mama. Use a glass.” The twelve-year old, suck-from-the-jug milk bandit caught me. He stood at the foot of the stairs, shoulders thrown back, pointy chin jutted forward, with a mop of blond hair standing on end. He wore race car pajamas accessorized with a face full of mock parental authority. He focused his eyes on the V-8 jug and ignored the bottle of vodka. I focused on the wood floor, examining the beaten path of tiny holes made by spikes from a logger’s cork boots. The path meandered from an old white refrigerator, to a yellow-enameled cook stove, to a chipped porcelain sink. A Copenhagen lid tacked down to cover a knot hole missing a knot added to the charm. The floor was beautiful in a state of decay. I was not.

“Go get dressed for school and do something with your crazy hair,” I changed the subject. Nick hustled back upstairs. I poured a double shot and made a mean Bloody Mary, like I did the day before.

Sergeant Swan’s death resulted in a non-disclosure clause for soldiers assigned to Portland Recruiting Battalion. Under this clause, a soldier could seek mental health care for drugs, alcohol, smoking cessation, marriage and family counseling, stress management, and other issues without informing the command. The goal was to alleviate negative stigma and permanent paper trail associated with reaching out for care. Mental health issues were career killers, but then again, so was suicide.

The drinking spiraled out of control. I drank to sleep at night. I drank to start in the morning. The guys at the office and I popped a beer or two in the afternoon. We kept cold ones in the office mini-fridge for certain occasions. We drank to celebrate enlistments. We drank to console losses. We drank on Mission Mondays.

I wish I could tell you that I sought help after Nick busted me drinking from the jug. But I didn’t, at least not right away. Going on the wagon wasn’t like kicking the cigarette habit. That seemed easy in retrospect. Nearly twenty-five years passed since my last smoke. I still crave sometimes and catch a trace of cigarette smoke lingering in my hair.

Like Swan, I often entertained suicide as an option, a brief amusement, and fantasy. I drove a lonely coastal road. The government vehicle hugged corners outlining the bay. One tug of the wheel would send the car crashing through a guard rail and into frigid water. One tug would do the job. I questioned my resolve to stay seated with doors locked and seatbelt

latched, but I would not need to. Hypothermia would take hold. The car would sink to the muddy bottom, leaving only a trace of ripples to mark the spot.

Suicidal thoughts were an unrealistic indulgence. Natural instinct to care for my boys blazed stronger than the pain. I realized I needed help, that my sons needed the reliability of a sober mom. I reported to the appointment wearing civilian clothes. Too ashamed to slum my rank and name around the crazy wing of Madigan Army Medical Center, I planned to pass as some poor soldier's neurotic wife. I did.

The young private checking in appointments asked for my husband's social security number. I pulled out my military identification, but it didn't click. He asked a second time. I tapped the card with the picture of me in uniform. His face colored. "Sorry, Sergeant, I thought..."

"No problem, kind of want to be incognito."

"What are we seeing you for?"

"Do I have to say?"

"Got to figure out what kind of in-take counselor to assign. Different folks got different problems."

"Right, having some trouble." I lowered my voice to a whisper. "Drinking a lot."

"Drugs too, Sergeant?"

"No. Just booze. Mostly wine, a little vodka, some beer. No drugs."

"No sweat. Take a seat in a blue chair. Fill out the in-take form. Someone will call you in a few."

I waited more than a few. I repeated the word “in-take.” I did not want to be taken *in* anywhere. I needed to be back on the road in two hours to pick kids up from daycare and meet Nick at the school bus stop. My schedule held little space for mental health care.

I imagined the counselor would be a female, a civilian. I sorted through the information I was willing to disclose. I decided to tell her about the booze and my obsession with locking doors and windows. I’d talk about my creepy First Sergeant’s car parked across the street from my house at night, how he did that to scare me. I’d tell her about late night phone calls, his offers to reduce my mission if I fucked him, and how my crew teased me to “take one for the team.” She’d learn about him cornering me in my office. How he pressed against me when he had a hard-on. How he made me powerless and trapped, like a hunted rabbit. Maybe I’d tell her about the nightmares, but probably not. The images didn’t make sense. Episodic flashes, non-linkable, like large chunks of data washed away. I wouldn’t tell her about the bay or suicide fantasy, but we’d discuss the stress of recruiting and suicide of Sergeant Swan. I’d explain how my house creaks, how coastal winds wail, and how trees stretch dark shadows over my life. She’d put a warm hand on my shoulder and hand me a tissue. We’d map out a recovery plan, outpatient care. I’d grow strong and visualize life outside of the Army as a civilian. We’d strategize an education and career path. She’d teach me to cope and eventually escape.

A tall lieutenant with a freckled complexion and a tuft of red hair called my name. I stood up from my blue chair and followed him to a cubical created from six-foot temporary walls. The cubical offered no privacy. He glanced over my in-take sheet, yawned and stretched. His pale blue eyes, trapped behind oversized aviator glasses, never made contact with mine. The florescent lighting illuminated strawberry-blond hairs on his thin forearms. I studied his

bitten finger nails and worked my way to the top of his head. I reduced him to a composite of bone, bluish veins, and taught skin covered in glowing cilia-like protrusions. He lacked muscle and a comforting degree of fleshiness. The conversation would be short.

His voice crackled and faded like a transistor radio. "You hitting the bottle, eh?"

"Yes sir."

He read details off the form, "You drink at night, in the morning, sometimes the afternoon?"

"Yes sir."

"And operating a government vehicle after a few?"

"Yes sir."

"You better knock that off, for sure."

"Yes sir."

"Sergeant, are you homicidal?"

"No sir."

"Suicidal?"

"No sir."

"What about AWOL? Any plans of deserting?"

"No sir."

"I know recruiting is tough, but the Army's got all sorts of problems. Domestic violence, murders, suicide. Real mess right now."

"Yes sir."

"You're not homicidal, suicidal, and you don't want to go AWOL. Right?"

“Correct sir.”

“Not much I can do for you. You’re stressed out, but fine.”

“Sir, what about the drinking?”

“Here’s the good news. You’re not an alcoholic. You abuse alcohol, but you are not an alcoholic. An important distinction.”

“What’s the difference?”

“You abuse to get through tough times. Real common among recruiters.”

“So, now what?”

“Cut back. Don’t drink and drive. Focus on your mission. Put ‘em in boots, Sergeant.

“Yes sir.”

“Now, can I get a *hooah*?”

“Hooah, Sir.”

Hooah, my ass. Portland recruiting battalion’s non-disclosure clause was a crock of shit. Lip service, a bandage to cover Sergeant Swan’s gaping exit wound, a tourniquet to stop Mrs. Swan from bleeding out on the white Berber. The murder and suicide of the couple meant nothing. The orphaned Swan children, waiting alone in a car for hours until discovered by a neighbor, meant nothing. The Swans were collateral damage, not part of the valued body count, the body count of Mission Mondays. My drinking was *my* problem, and since I wasn’t consciously attempting suicide, I had to find solutions on my own.

The drive from Madigan Army Medical Center to my house took two hours. I had two hours to think. Two hours to find another way to sleep at night. Two hours to get my shit together. I stopped by a health food store in Astoria, Oregon. I leaked a little of my troubles to

the sage woman behind the counter. I probably didn't need to. She seemed to understand me the moment I walked in her shop. She mixed herbal teas and prescribed lavender baths. I picked up a few books on natural remedies. She explained that I needed to align my life with the pulse of Mother Nature. I liked the idea of a private, homeopathic self-cure. I purchased everything suggested.

Sleep did not come the first night nor soon after, nor did drinking cessation, but I was cutting back. Hot lavender baths, reading, and herbal teas replaced a couple of glasses per night. Morning hangovers and Bloody Mary gave way to yoga tapes in the VCR and healthy breakfasts. I visited my unlikely mentor often and sponged knowledge from our conversations and from watching her create concoctions from amber colored jars of herbs lining the back wall behind the register.

I purchased herbs in bulk to create remedies of my own design. I bought and borrowed homeopathic remedy books. I tried easier recipes first and mastered a few teas and soaks before stepping up to lip balms, salves, and massage oils. I absorbed book after book. I studied Coney's, "The Complete Soapmaker," working up the courage to gather supplies.

It's difficult to grip the stem of a wine glass while wearing chemical gloves slicked with olive oil. Missing two sips, the glass sat across the table. Gloved and goggled, I used a long-handled whisk to stir a speckled, porcelain-enamel canning pot. My first batch of soap made me feel part witch, part mad scientist, and partly relaxed.

I searched for *Trace*, the moment in cold process soap making when oils and alkali saponify. A whisk draws across the top of the emulsion and leaves a design to indicate trace.

Once trace is achieved, additional ingredients like essential oils, fragrance, color, and exfoliating botanicals may be added.

A wide-mouthed mason jar holding lavender essential oil warmed in a pot of water. Lavender vapors danced from the jar and permeated the rooms of the cottage. The boys slept soundly. My eyes followed the whisk, trance like. I waited for two hours, stirring the pot, eyes following the whisk, round and round, calm settling in.

Soap making equaled therapy for alcohol abuse and PTSD. The PTSD went undiagnosed for another decade. Unknowingly, I practiced a form of *Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)*, psychotherapeutic treatment for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Eye movements, similar to REM sleep, evoke neurological and physiological changes that may aid in the processing of traumatic memories or provide temporary diversion. Based on controlled research, the American Psychiatric Association, Veteran's Affairs, and Department of Defense place EMDR in the highest category of effectiveness for the treatment of trauma. My do-it-yourself version worked more as a distraction, rather than a long-term solution. This is often the case, even in clinically led EMDR therapy.

Night after night, I bent over the pot. Soap making evolved into an addiction, a new obsession, a way home from alcohol, a recess from locking windows and doors, a temporary respite from PTSD. Rosemary, peppermint, lavender, patchouli, and citrus transported me beyond lonely walls of the cottage and far from the dangerous neighborhood of my mind. All I had to do was stir. Eyes followed whisk, round and round the pot, searching for trace.

The Army's body snatching machine rolled on without as much as a hiccup after Swan's death. Recruiters in my station relied on beer and macabre humor to put his death behind.

“I bet his station gets a mission reduction,” said one recruiter.

“Nah, doubt it,” said another. “The command will dig that mutha-fucker up and make him sit in his goddam desk until he meets quota. There’s no break, not even when you’re dead.”

It’s horrible to say, but humor helped. So did soap making. The process eased tension and wiped away most of my suicidal fantasies. For the most part, I managed to get control over the drinking. I relapsed under pressure, but I was getting better. Soap making also distracted me from work-related stressors. My station would make mission one month and failed the next. We tried not to get too hung up about it. Our office climate calmed. We focused on each other and the kids we put in boots. We tried to serve the recruit and not just the recruiting command.

A high school kid named Chelsea walked into the station one afternoon to join the Army. Sergeant Wilson recruited her, but while she waited to ship off to basic, she became my responsibility. I was the only female in the office, and Chelsea sought a mentor. She posed questions not easily answered by male recruiters. She visited the office almost daily, popping by to talk about Army life or sometimes to just hang out. We were not supposed to have personal relationships with recruits, but Chelsea was something special. Being around her made me happy, and I was short on friends. We hit the gym together and went jogging as she prepared for the physical stresses of training. I liked having her around and put her to work in the office. Green eyes widened and her blond head bobbed when she answered the phone. The kid cracked me up. She filed papers, ran for pizza, and tidied up. She served as the little sister in our recruiting family.

Chelsea shipped off to boot camp in the summer, completed training, and returned to the office for a few weeks on hometown recruiting duty. The short-term assignment was designed to bring popular kids back home after completing basic training. Chelsea drew in teenagers like a magnet when she returned to her old high school wearing a uniform and sporting an improved figure. Teachers gushed. Boys fawned, and girls envied. Chelsea served as hot bait for new recruits.

Sergeant Jones used Chelsea like a weapon, taking her to every recruiting function, school visit, and parental meetings. Jones was a new recruiter, a married man with two little girls. He struggled with the long hours and daunting task to find bodies willing and able to enlist. He failed to meet mission his first few months and needed Chelsea's help.

I worked later than usual that night preparing for an inspection. The other recruiters were out of the office, most went home for the evening. Jones planned a late meeting at the library with Chelsea and a potential applicant. It was her last work day. I granted her a few days off to hang out with family and friends before shipping to her new duty location in Texas. It was after eight, and neither of them had returned. I packed up my things to go home as Chelsea came through the door.

Chelsea appeared sloppy and out of the ordinary for her tidy self. Stray hairs slipped from the twist of a sundrenched bun. Her loosely tucked uniform shirt wrinkled, and a gap exposed the bright white of her bra. I examined her blouse and tugged the thread of a missing button.

"What happened to you?"

"It's nothing."

"You okay?"

"I'm fine. Honest." She started to cry.

"Where's Jones?"

"He dropped me off by my car. We thought the station was closed."

"But you tried the door anyway?"

"Yeah, wondered if you were still here."

"Well, here I am. Now tell me what's wrong and why you look like shit."

"Promise you won't tell?"

"Sure."

"No. I mean woman to woman. Do you promise woman to woman?"

"I promise."

"Swear to God."

"Woman to woman, I swear to God."

"Sergeant Jones fucked me."

"What?"

"In his car, behind the library."

"And this was okay with you?"

"No. Not really."

"Did you tell him to stop?"

"Yeah, but then he just said, *I see how you are*. He kept going. Kept pushing me back in the seat."

"And then?"

"I let him fuck me. I got scared. I didn't fuck back. But he just kept on fucking." She choked on these words and bawled. I hugged Chelsea, letting her head rest on my chest. Tears and snot seeped through the thin material of my uniform blouse.

"What a dirty mother-fucker. He's going to pay, Chels."

"No. You can't tell. You promised."

I pushed her head up and made her look me in the eyes. "Listen, I'm sorry I promised. I should never have promised. I have to tell. It's my responsibility."

"No one will ever believe me. They'll call me a whore."

"Yeah. Probably true."

"I should have kept my mouth shut."

"No. You got to tell. Talking is good. Next, we got to do something about it."

"Can you wait? Wait until I'm gone to Texas? I don't want to face him. I can't handle this."

"We can't wait. I got to tell."

"They'll never believe me. His word against mine. He'll say I wanted it."

"True. Like a date rape, it's going to be tough to prove. I'll dig around a little, make some calls, talk to his female applicants, and visit his schools. Find out what he's been up to. Maybe you're not the only one."

"So you'll wait?"

"Only long enough so you don't have to deal with him."

"Okay, and then hang him by his nut sack."

“I’ll try kiddo. I promise. You got to realize it’s going to get ugly. They may not believe us, even with extra evidence. You’ll get questioned, called a whore, and he may skate free no matter how hard we try.”

Chelsea changed into my workout clothes. I sealed her uniform and undergarments in a white trash bag. I planned to hand the bag over to the military investigators that took her case. I pulled a couple of beers out of the mini fridge, and we drank to calm nerves. I made a toast, promising Chelsea I’d hang Jones by his balls. I should never have promised her anything.

The next morning I called a coastal high school and spoke to a guidance counselor. I expressed concern over the behavior of one of my recruiters and asked if she had concerns. She gave me a list, a handful of girls Jones spent too much time hanging around.

“These girls aren’t recruiting material,” she said.

“How so?”

“A couple of them are too young, not even juniors. The others aren’t set to graduate. They won’t qualify. They’re what you might call, *troubled girls*.”

I met with each girl and the counselor. I collected five affidavits. The girls reported everything from a kiss to small gifts and from dinner and a movie to driving lessons behind the wheel of a government car. Most described Jones’ actions as big-brotherly. The counselor recognized his grooming behaviors and wrote a letter of concern for me to deliver to the command.

I called the other schools in his assigned area and collected several more statements. Each statement indicated levels of impropriety, but none alluded to rape or physical abuse. I

missed something or someone. Chelsea left for Texas. I reported the rape the statements and letters up the chain of command.

Ordered to cease all contact with Chelsea and abort further investigation into the nature of Sergeant Jones' alleged misconduct, I waited in the dark for justice. Jones threatened to kill me, and the command removed him from my office pending investigation.

The statements from high school girls and letters from concerned counselors passed up the chain of command. I received a reprimand for weakening the already fragile relationships between Army recruiters and school guidance counselors. The information collected stirred only enough concern to remove Jones from recruiting duty. He fell comfortably back into his old duties as an Army mechanic. I promised never to recruit another female. I kept this promise.

Chelsea's mother and I kept in contact. She relayed messages between her daughter and me, and kept me posted on the pending investigation. Labeled a whore, the little tease who trapped the poor sergeant into a forbidden relationship, she suffered through hell. Not a thing became of the night behind the library, not even fraternization or an adultery charge. The investigation recovered Chelsea's pubic hair and traces of incriminating DNA on the passenger seat of the vehicle. His DNA was found on her uniform and inside her panties. This only proved sex happened. The investigation determined consensual sex between a young private and a staff sergeant.

Chelsea illuminated my dark secret. I shuddered at the similarities between her experience and mine. Chelsea was a young soldier. She was eager to please and naïve. She trusted a recruiter and respected the hierarchy of rank. Sergeant Jones abused his authority and committed rape, just as my recruiter once did to me. Bits of my old nightmare came in

flashbacks, triggered by the event and perpetuated by the investigation. I binged, but struggled for control.

I abused Chelsea too. I used her demoralizing experience in an attempt to right a past wrong, to seek transferred revenge and the delayed gratification of justice. Justice will never come, not for Chelsea and not for me. Part of me wished I had kept my promise to her, allowing the secret to die in the dark, to go unreported. Maybe I prevented Jones from molesting teenage girls or other soldiers, but I doubt it. His behaviors were part of culture and in that culture his actions were normed. After all, only sluts, dikes, and women far too ugly to catch a man join the Army.

Maybe Chelsea forgave and forgot, sought therapy and healed, or stuffed the rape away in her subconscious mind. I'll never know. She refused to speak with me after the investigation. According to rumor, she went wild at her Texas duty station and drank heavily. She received a hardship discharge and returned home early as the single mother of an Army lieutenant's baby. I lost track of her as the cycle raged on, but I think about Chelsea once in a while, especially when I make promises I can't keep.

Chapter 5: Lucky Number Three

He walked through the double doors of the reception center on Fort Jackson, South Carolina in the early-fall of 1998. The wind whirled and whispered to me, announcing his presence. Leaves crunched under hiking boots, and somewhere in the distant future a campfire crackled.

He spoke low and melodic, telling the woman at the counter he needed to check in for class. “ANOC,” he said. Advanced Non-Commissioned Officer Course, I understood the acronym well, as I filled out my own check-in paperwork for ANOC. The course, a leadership academy for senior enlisted soldiers, was supposed to be academically difficult, physically challenging, and mentally exhausting. For recruiters, the course served as a welcome break, a relief, and a non-stop party.

I needed the break. I left home overwhelmed with my recruiting job, the stress of my second divorce proceedings, the single-parent juggling act, and the demands of a way-too-young, Mexican lover named, Ruben. I arrived in South Carolina prepared to party. I embraced the six kid-free weeks, the physical exercise, and the camaraderie of fellow recruiters.

I planned to ignore the advances and harassment of male comrades. I’d been through this drill before. Females were few, two lesbians, one married woman, and me. We were four strong in a smorgasbord line of sixty men, few were single, most were married, and most claimed status as geographical bachelors. I had my pick, but wasn’t interested. I was entertaining the idea of hopping the fence, becoming a lesbian. I wasn’t sure if I had it in me, but I thought I might give it a go. It wasn’t uncommon for strait girls to switch teams after a decade of service and years of putting up with sexual bullshit.

I remained dead set against men, until the alarm clock in my uterus jangled the moment Jim walked through the door. We spent every evening after class together. By the second week, we scrunched in close to share the single bunk in my barracks room. Army romances usually end after a temporary duty assignment or deployment. Soldiers playing lovers go separate ways, returning to permanent duty stations and often back home to the wife and kids. Jim was divorced, and his kids lived in Florida. He returned to his duty station at Fort Lewis, Washington, and I returned to mine in Longview, Washington. He made the two-hour drive every weekend to stay with me in the millworker's cottage.

We married in June of 1999, nine months after meeting. We were married, but I wasn't sure I was ready to live with him. My job was in Longview, Nick went to junior high in Astoria, and the cottage was supposed to be my forever home.

I am not a good wife. A two-time survivor of divorce war, my romantic relationships played out on passive-aggressive battlefields. The fight was always about power. The common denominator was me. I could have promised to try harder, but this seemed insincere, lip-service, like I believed change was possible.

Maybe I was selfish for not placing my goals as warrior, student, daughter, and mother secondary to the goal of finding and keeping a man. I found them all right, but was the keeping part that troubled me. The easy answer would be to give up men altogether, go solo. I tried going on the man-wagon, but I fell off when I saw the right set of eyes, a broad chest, or in Jim's case, amazing thighs. I never considered thighs as a sexual attractor, at least not until I saw Jim's.

I never set out to be a crappy wife and a matrimonial train wreck. But who does? I grew up with first-rate examples. My mother and grandmothers were textbook wives. All three doted on husbands. They loved and supported men who sometimes did not deserve to be loved and supported. They cooked and cleaned, remained selfless and ancillary, simplified and defined by men and marriage.

My grandmothers stayed within well-worn roles, but they dreamed. My mother oppressed dreams. For years, she stuffed wants and needs in some dark pit of altruism. I've tried, tried to be like my mother, like my grandmothers, but I never last.

It would be fair to say that I didn't have a lot of faith in Lucky Number Three. Married but living apart worked for a while. I liked the idea of easing into the responsibilities of being Jim's wife. I was fine with the commitment, but not fine with any threat of freedom. We kept separate houses, banking practices, and bills. We planned to live together eventually, and as bad luck, or maybe it was good luck, would have it, we didn't wait long.

The cottage burnt in the late summer of 1999. Not much was salvageable from the forever-home of Johnny & Lorraine. My forever in the cottage lasted less than two years. A fire investigation crew and arson unit spent days sifting through the rubble for answers and determined the fire started outside on the back stoop. Hand-hewn cedar siding invited flames to lick the second-story and dance across the roof.

A perfectly round whole charred all through the kitchen floor. I recognized the shape and size as an exit wound from a five-gallon can of oil used to make soap. Beneath the timbers of the cottage rested remains of a long-burning accelerant. The closet, containing hundreds of pounds of soap, disappeared along with all contents. Three recognizable items remained. One

was a cast-iron bank with a matriculated race car and driver, a Christmas gift for my father. The second was Robert Fulghum's book, *It was on fire when I lay down on it*. The last item was a gold recruiting badge. The survival of these items must mean something symbolic, but I haven't figured it out yet.

The fire department expected arson, but BB-sized copper balls bedazzled the wood siding of an adjacent garage, hinting an electrical fire. I stood in the gravel driveway, facing the road, and answered the fire chief's questions. I stared at an etched outline of the First Sergeant's white Jeep Cherokee, a mirage. I blinked at the sting of salt, refocused, and dismissed the image traced in my memory as a ghost vision left over to scare me.

I withheld suspicions regarding the First Sergeant when questions veered to potential arsonists. I don't understand why. The fire chief asked questions about my ex-husband, an easy assumption, an angry ex seeking revenge. I knew his whereabouts and defended his innocence.

I never learned why my house burnt down. I pictured the First Sergeant lurking around with gasoline can in one hand, lighter in the other, playing the part of jilted wanna-be-lover and control freak. I bit my cheeks to keep my mouth shut. Years of conditioning sealed my lips but not my imagination.

I didn't rebuild after the fire. I sold the property, moved away from Astoria, left the recruiting battalion and active army, and accepted a part-time position at a reserve unit in Washington. I moved closer to Fort Lewis and in with my new husband.

Life with Jim was easy. Early morning scrambles to dump kids at daycare ended. Late night fears and anxiety attacks softened, at least for the most part. End-of-the-month struggles to pay bills disappeared. I breathed easily, but easy made me suspicious. At any moment the

relationship might end. I never allowed myself to become lazy, never took what I had for granted, never viewed my situation as permanent.

Jim's sons visited on holidays and summer vacation. Life with my stepsons was better than most merged families hoped for, and yet in the early years, I wanted more. I married Jim when James was twelve, and Chris was eleven. My own sons were twelve, five, and three.

I tried to blend this family of five sons, to produce something tangible, something minivan-ish and cohesive out of my new life with expanded brood. I was trying my damndest to be a good wife and a good mother.

Limited to summer vacations and holiday breaks, nothing stuck. True brotherly love failed to blossom. Maternal instinct withered on the vine. I was failing.

I acted desperate during our first late summer trip to visit Papaw, Jim's grandpa in Ohio. Papaw waged war against the groundhogs chewing holes through his dilapidated red barn. The rodents gnawed at the wood planks of his porch, infested and weakened building foundations, reclaiming the land. Papaw grew too old to fight. A month prior, he injured a hip in a fall while shooting at one digging up his flowerbed.

Chris held tight to Papaw's old Sears and Roebuck .22 rifle. He wanted to be a man, to take care of his great-grandpa's problem. Jim showed him how to load the gun. Papaw pointed to a field pocked with burrows. No one lectured about safety, about the dangers of shooting toward the road, the house, other houses, cars, people, domesticated animals, or his own limbs. Chris slung the rifle strap over his boney frame and stuffed a box of rounds in the back of baggy jeans. He marched across mowed corn, hunting groundhog.

I sat on the porch, pressing mother-bones deep into the seat of a ladder back rocking chair. I bit my lip, trying hard to stay out of man-business. Papaw, Jim, and James sat on the porch laughing at Chris. He had a gun, bullets, and permission to kill, but lacked the marksmanship to succeed.

A groundhog popped up. Chris fumbled with the rifle, made too much noise, and took too much time. This happened over and over, much to the delight of the porch crowd. On each occasion, the critter spooked, or grew bored and sauntered off before Chris fired a shot.

Frustration built. I saw hopelessness in the sag of his posture and sensed anger in the stomp of his Nike hi-tops as he crushed corn stubble. I imagine he tried to block the laughter out, but failed. He needed to execute a groundhog to feel like a man. He wanted to shut his brother up, please his Papaw, and prove himself to his father. He popped off premature shots, all misses. I flinched eight times to the beat of the rifle's recoil.

I taught basic rifle marksmanship in Army boot camp while serving as a drill sergeant several years before marrying Jim. I helped train hundreds of young soldiers to shoot. I knew better than to give a kid a rifle and ammo without instruction and safety briefings. The rocking chair no longer held me.

Dry stalks scrapped my bare legs and sandaled feet as I tip-toed my way to his position behind a large oak. Chris tried to use the tree trunk to support a standing fire posture after giving up failed attempts in the prone. His neck, forearms, and face were chaffed from lying face down in the field. Tears welled. He pulled a Green Bay Packers cap low on his brow. I studied the tree bark until he regained composure.

“Tough time?”

“Yeah, stupid gun.”

“Rifle appears good for an antique. Want me to show you a couple tricks?”

“I can shoot. Don’t need help from a girl.”

“Ah, right. How bout I sit here with you? Help you spot?”

“Whatever.”

I am an excellent shot. I earned marksmanship badges for the rifle and pistol in my military career. I never shot for sport, never hunted, never helped kill an animal, never wanted to.

Chris popped off another eight rounds, all misses. I said nothing, but maybe I breathed a little too hard when the ninth groundhog stood up, stared in our direction, and bent over to munch a patch of clover.

“You think you can do better?”

“No, I didn’t mean...”

“Do it then. Go ahead. Show me how tough you are.”

Before I had time to think, Chris stuffed the rifle in my arms and shoved me from my kneeling position behind the oak. I stood and pulled the rifle hard into my right shoulder, finding the sweet spot – the natural pocket formed when my arm cocks back and my index finger gropes the trigger.

Tacit knowledge takes over. This happens when you do something over and over again. You catch a cadence, a beat by the numbers, singing out the steps in your head. Subconscious. A flip of a switch to autopilot, you act. Your breath stills, a shallow trickle low in flared nostrils. Left eye shuts. Right eye tunnels through peep sites. Cheek meets worn wood of the butt stock.

Muscles contract and relax as soles grip the earth. Sensations dull, except the gentle pressure on the tip of your trigger finger. The round bursts without expectation. You never expect the burst, a true sign of an expert marksman. Anticipation leads to spontaneous flinch. Flinch sends the trajectory off course. You never flinch. Flinch, even a little, and you fail.

I heard a high pitched squeal, a rustle of cornstalk, and nothing. Even the porch quieted. Dust and sulfur filled my mouth. I smacked my lips at the dry, shook the ringing blast from my ears, and wiped carbon sting and grit from my nose and eyes.

Chris ran up to the groundhog and came back toward me, jumping and skipping. "Holy shit! You got him." He wrapped his arms around me. "You are awesome. You killed him. Blew him a new asshole."

I wasn't awesome. I walked over to inspect my prize with the kid dangling from my waist. He hugged me with abandonment, exactly how I thought I wanted him to. I craved his affection but buckled under the weight. He felt too heavy now. He would grow harder to satisfy in the future.

I stared down at the fuzzy thing and thought of Bill Murray and a goofy movie I watched at least ten times with my own kids. I thought of Punxsutawney Phil, the famous groundhog of Pennsylvania, how each year of my childhood, Grandma reported if the groundhog saw his shadow, and if we would have an early spring. I thought how Grandma never killed anything to bond with me, how I never killed to bond with my own three boys.

I handed the rifle back to Chris and started to cry. I reached the house and Chris joined the porch of laughing men. Now they laughed at me, a silly woman crying over dead groundhog.

After the innocent rodent murder, I stopped trying so hard. To my surprise, the boys gravitated toward me. In a morbid way, killing the groundhog helped. The boys loved to tell the story of how I shot the poor thing through the ass and cried like a baby. I didn't mind the teasing. In my family, teasing meant that you were loved. Jim and his boys loved me.

I enjoyed a temporary break from being a primary wage-provider. I worked on my mothering and wifely skills, fixed up our home, planted a garden, and made soap, lots of soap, replacing the closetful lost in the fire. I stirred all night, finding peace in waves of essential oils and learning to trust the sureness of trace. I opened a soap business and sold my therapy at Pike's Place Market in Seattle.

My small business wasn't enough to ensure my future. I worried about my ability to provide for the boys if my third marriage failed. It was a horrible thing, strategizing a bailout plan instead of building a stronger marriage. I lost faith in the longevity of love and gave up on the notion of Prince Charming. I was my own white knight and the only one I truly trusted. I no longer had the full-time Army, the false sense of security disguised as monthly paychecks and the promised future of an early retirement.

I had finished a bachelor degree in April of 1999, six months before leaving active duty. The bachelor degree wasn't enough to make me competitive in the job market. I completed a master's program to ease the sense of inadequacy, and then picked up a teaching gig at a community college. I taught English as a second language and basic skills to adults working toward the General Education Diploma. My work fulfilled me, but I missed the sense of belonging I experienced in the military.

I kept up the weekend warrior thing in the Army Reserve, attending military broadcast school in Baltimore and journalism courses near Washington, D.C. Getting dressed in a uniform and lacing up combat boots was comforting. The travel added the missing adventure I craved.

Determined to balance the teaching job and the Army reserve requirements with family, I included my sons in work and travel. It was a novel concept, but one that was surprisingly embraced by upper echelon leaders. My kids became common place in the classroom and at the reserve unit. There was so much to show and teach my boys. I hated to leave them home. I pulled Nicholas out of junior high with his teachers' blessings. Teachers created work packets and writing assignments, and breathed a collective sigh of relief as the boy in the corner, my ADHD son, left on a trip. Nicholas loved Williamsburg, and Washington D.C. He grew into a bit of a war-history buff. His favorite site was the Viet Nam Memorial.

There are 58,267 names on the Viet Nam War Memorial Wall. They are listed chronologically by casualty date and then alphabetized to accommodate the loss suffered in a single day. Approximately twelve-thousand names are listed as Missing in Action (MIA) or Prisoner of War (POW). These names are denoted with a cross. Names of confirmed dead are denoted with a diamond. Once a MIA or a POW is confirmed dead, a diamond is superimposed over the cross. If a living MIA or a POW returns, the cross is circumscribed by a circle. This has never happened.

I visited the Wall only one time during the daylight. It was back in 1987. Nicholas was a baby. School boys moved from panel to panel, rubbing names with charcoal pencils and tracing paper. I was touched. I sat on a step and wondered why the children knew so many deceased on the wall. I didn't know anyone, but then I learned the game.

A boy yelled. "Look, I found me! It's me, Benjamin Sutton. Hey, everybody, I'm dead."

The boy proudly held out a pencil rubbing of his name. No one gathered him up. No one shushed him or pulled him away by an ear. I wasn't angered by his intrusion on hallow ground. If anything, he made me more aware. Benjamin Sutton put the 58,267 names in perspective. Chances are high if you are a male child born with a reasonably common name, you may find a match on the Viet Nam Wall. Only eight women's names met the requirements for inclusion, so I'd never thought to search for my own.

I visited the wall with Nicholas on a spring evening in 1999. I scanned names for no one in particular and inhaled a cherry blossom breeze. Soft light flooded the base of the polished black granite, and my reflection crept along the panels as if on night patrol. I shuffled in the darkness and watched my son. He negotiated the purchase of a MIA/POW bracelet from a haggard vet keeping vigil for brothers unaccounted. I didn't hear the whispered conversation, but was proud Nick kept his voice down. The evening dropped a velvet blanket on the wall and surrounding memorial, secluding it from the rest of Constitution Park and the hustle of Washington D.C.

Nick's twelve-year old head bobbed as he listened to the old veteran tell what looked like a war story. Money and bracelet were exchanged. The plodding of a clumsy adolescent gait broke sobering silence. Flashes of blue and red lights from his Nike hi-tops moved across the mirrored granite walls like a disco strobe. His cheeks flushed with the cool spring air, but his blonde buzz-cut glistened with beads of sweat.

"Mama, check it out. The guy on my bracelet, William Stinson, we share the same birthday. January the 8th. Me, Elvis, and now this guy. Cool, huh?"

Nick's innocent misunderstanding made me think of the naivety of Benjamin Sutton and my first daylight visit twelve years ago. Nick was twelve. Benjamin Sutton was probably twelve at the time.

"Hey, buddy. I don't think you quite understand what's going on here." I led him to a bench flooded with yellowing light. "Now let's see your bracelet."

"See, January 8th, Mom. My birthday."

"Right, about that. What did the man tell you about this bracelet?"

"Oh, lots of stuff. My guy rode in a helicopter and shot a gun – a door gunner. You can read everything about him." Nick fished a crumpled sheet of marigold colored paper from his pocket and I read.

*Name: William Sherril Stinson
Rank/Branch: E5/US Army
Unit: 67th Aviation Company, 11th Combat Aviation, 1st Aviation Brigade
Date of Birth: 17 June 1947
Home City of Record: Georgiana, AL
Date of Loss: 08 January 1973
Country of Loss: South Vietnam
Loss Coordinates: 16421N 1070956E (YD324528)
Status (in 1973): Missing In Action
Category: 1
Acft/Vehicle/Ground: UH1H
Other Personnel in Incident: Elbert W. Bush; William L. Deane; Richard A. Knutson; Manuel A. Lauterio; Mickey A. Wilson (all missing)*

"Nick, do you understand what *Date of Loss* means?"

"It's not his birthday." He slid the band from his wrist and set it on the slab bench.

"Right. January 8th is the day William Stinson got lost. He went missing in action."

"Is he dead, Mama?"

"I think so." The bracelet sat unclaimed on the bench between us as I continued to read:

SYNOPSIS:

On January 8, 1973, at about 1430 hours, the aircraft departed a landing zone en route to other LZs without making radio contact with the 2nd Battalion Technical Operations Center. When no radio contact was received by 1500 hours, the other LZs were queried. The helicopter did not go to either of the two designated LZs, nor had any communication been established.

Intelligence reports indicated of the six men aboard, four were seen alive on the ground. Further information indicated the aircraft did not explode or burn on impact.

The families of the men assumed their loved ones would be released with the other POWs. But the crew of the UH1H was not released, and have not been released or found since that day. As thousands of reports of Americans alive in Southeast Asia mount, these families wonder if their men are among the hundreds thought to be still alive.

“So, he could be still alive.” Nick picked up the bracelet and concentrated on William’s name as if expecting a sign.

“The idea is for you to wear the bracelet until Sergeant William Stinson or his remains are found and returned to American soil.”

“How long will that be, Mama?”

“Probably a long time. Come on. We’ll find him on the wall.”

“Today is Willy’s lucky day.” Nick traced the sandblasted letters of William’s name.

“Slicky-Nicky is on the case. We’ll find him for sure.”

“I’m sure Sergeant Stinson will be thrilled having you on his search team.”

The aluminum bracelet bearing William Stinson’s name rode Nicholas’ arm to McCleary Elementary school every day for the rest of the school year. It held fast throughout the summer, surviving a fifty mile hike through the Olympics, a fishing trip at Olallie Lake, and a season of Pee-Wee Football. In November, Nick abandoned the bracelet in a soap dish. It had

stayed in the dish for most of the month before I tucked it away in a jewelry box. Eight months may not seem like a much of a commitment on Nick's part, but it was long enough.

William Stinson's remains were positively identified on November 3, 1999, along with the remains of three other soldiers. Two crewmembers are still missing. All that remained of William Stinson was fifteen teeth or parts of teeth and bone fragments.

I didn't tell Nicholas about the found remains. He had abandoned the bracelet and abandoned his fascination with war. He was focused on building a tree fort in the back yard with his buddies. Building the fort was enough to worry about. War should not be the concern of a twelve-year old.

Nick worked on the fort nearly a year. He scrounged materials from neighbors, roadside ditches, and burn piles. He occupied the fort for less than two years before Jim requested orders to Fayetteville, North Carolina.

The orders to Fayetteville meant career progression for Jim, but felt like a kick in the guts to me. I felt content in our home and with my work. The kids were happy. I had friends and wiggled my way into a community. My garden was growing, and I was part way through a Ph.D. program. I didn't want to uproot life to follow a military man. I better understood the anxiety and depression Joe experienced when leaving Seattle and his support systems.

Nicholas refused to make the move. He was almost in high school. At age thirteen, he had attended seven elementary schools and one junior high. He endured new-kid hazing eight times. He was done feeling unstable and went to live with my parents, where he attended Molalla High as a fourth-generation Wettlaufer.

Despite the move, I finished my doctorate and found work in a literacy project. I failed to find new friends and a sense of community. I missed Nicholas and harbored shame for moving without him. I had done what I swore never to do. I chose a man over my child. My guilt turned to resentment. Jim resented me for not being a supportive military wife. I hated that title, military wife. Mutual resentment tore our marriage apart, and Jim slipped.

While he was away at a military conference, Jim called home to check in. He told me he needed to work late on a presentation in his commander's room, and would be unavailable by phone. He hung up, slid the phone into his pocket and butt-dialed me.

I answered the call, and my heart dropped. "Hey babe, if I had known you were coming back, I'd have saved your beer," said a female voice.

I eavesdropped for forty-five minutes during his chat with a flying waitress in a bar at the Atlanta Hilton. I pictured her, blonde, slight of frame, too much eyeliner, surgically enhanced tits, spanx underneath hose – the illusion of taut, maybe a navy scarf knotted around her neck, lipsticked in strawberry pink champagne, the antithesis of me.

After his phone died, I paced the kitchen floor. I tried to write it off as a harmless flirt, an experiment to test his game. I called his room at least twenty times, until finally at three in the morning, he answered. Of course he lied. One lie rolled into the next as he explained his whereabouts. He had no clue about the butt-dial.

By the time he returned home, I had all but memorized the forty-five minute call. I'd never be able to prove anything beyond a conversation in a bar, and Jim would never admit to anything beyond. But it didn't matter. The fact that he had forty-five minutes of energy to

entertain another woman killed me, especially when he spoke few civil words and had no time to spare for me.

I obsessed over the phone call, picking his words apart into data byte, and sorting the bytes into thematic clusters. Clusters led to assumptions. Assumptions propelled action. Actions drove me north to a new job, New York, new house, new life, hundreds of miles from Jim.

It hurt that I no longer held his attention, or had the ability to engage him in forty-minute conversations about nothing and everything while sharing a beer on our sofa, in our home. But I wasn't sorry that career and children and schooling, my own goals, my own life, got in the way of my duties as a military wife. I was sorry I no longer blocked the television with creamy nakedness – a tried and true best practice to lure him back to me, that I forgot to spoon him while he slept, mapping his landscape, breathing his breath. But mostly, I was sorry I answered the call.

Chapter 6: Remodeling

I left Jim and moved to Syracuse for a civilian position as an education director with the Department of Defense. It wasn't the Army, but it was close. I purchased an old house and spent anxiety-filled evenings in overalls and a shower cap. I spackled, painted, tore out false ceilings, stripped floors, wallpapered, and replaced fixtures to restore the 1856 plantation home to what I imaged to be her original splendor. Home renovation was good medicine, cheaper than therapy and more productive than drinking.

The boys and I carved out a life in upstate New York, and I tried to lose the bitterness over what seemed like a sham of a marriage. I had tossed away a military career to be his wife, and even though I often hated that career, it had been mine. I trusted Jim and got burned, but I wasn't ready for a third divorce. I wanted time to reestablish, recoup, and more importantly, rebuild a shattered ego.

I missed Jim. I missed our old life, and I missed the Army. I missed the patriotic high of serving my country, even when serving had sucked. I missed my identity as a soldier. I missed uniforms, combat boots, guns, good discipline and order. I missed all the things I once swore to hate.

No matter how much I missed a soldier's life, my stomach grew sick with each thought of returning to the Army. I had hit the Army ceiling. I refused to endure further harassment, bullying, or sexually-motivated violence. Being all I could be just wasn't good enough anymore. I channeled my inner-warrior, and together we strategized a do-over.

I jumped ship, abandoned all affiliation with the Army and the enlisted ranks in 2005. I earned a commission to become an officer in the United States Coast Guard. I rewrote the rules

that changed my game, changed my attitude, changed my future, and changed my life. My only regret was not making the strategic move twenty years earlier.

It sounds silly, but officer candidate school and a shiny set of brass bars helped me feel whole again. I felt equal to Jim, if not a little superior. He attended my Coast Guard graduation and saluted me after the ceremony. The salute was as good of an apology that he could make.

Jim and I reconciled. He sought orders back to the west coast, and so did I. He sold his house in Fayetteville, and I sold mine in Syracuse. By the spring of 2006, we were back in Washington and living under one roof.

I planned for a long, happy career bobbing along on the waves of Puget Sound and the Straits of Juan de Fuca. I turned in the camouflage for a crisp blue uniform cut from sailcloth. Life ran smoother in the Coast Guard. I was an officer, no longer enlisted. I earned higher pay and the respect of my crew, and operated in a team of individuals I admired. But mostly, I slipped the strangle hold of sexual harassment. The Coast Guard was different.

An illness loomed on my blue-sky horizon. I heard the symptoms long before the diagnosis landed in my medical chart. The phantom noise started almost in tandem with a three-year tour navigating the Hood Canal, a fjord of the Puget Sound. I worked as part of an armed-escort team of highly specialized folks. We were charged with protecting the Navy's transiting nuclear submarines. I volunteered as a gunner first, partly because I knew the job, but mostly for the love of sound, a tell-tale rat-a-tat-tat of an old M-60 machine gun.

I climbed my way to Patrol Commander. It seemed more fight than climb, overcoming the learning curve of a new service. I earned the title as the first commissioned female Patrol Commander in the United States Coast Guard. It was a strategic plan, a shameless lust for

power and career progression. I moved from my position behind a gun, to one high on the bridge, overseeing a fleet of vessels easing a submarine safely out to sea or bringing one home from deployment.

The bridge was comfortable, a step up. Climate control removed the wind and salt's sting. Hot coffee camouflaged the planet's amniotic brine. A radio transmitting squawks of transit communications, traffic advisories, and weather updates drowned out the music of gulls. My phantom sound, the noise in my ear, replaced water clapping against the freeboard below the gun mount on the bow.

At first, I liked the sound, a dull roar, waves crashing into nothing, my private ocean, like a seashell affixed to my left ear. I found the phantom charming, appropriate given my line of work. Think of money and pain saved forgoing a souvenir tattoo, a popular trend with sailors commemorating assignments of such caliber. I'd never need a naked bombshell riding an anchor, or a tangled red octopus sinking a ship, or a pirate skeleton with a knife through his skull. The sea lived in my ear.

I thought the noise would fade after a few days on land. Ghost sounds of the sea, kind of like when you exit a rock concert and still hear the music, or take off roller-skates but still glide on wheels beneath your feet. The sound lingered, grew louder, an angry roaring ocean, drowning out family conversation, the six o'clock news, the calming cadence of my breathing. Gone. The roar took over, moved me in and out of my job like the tide, crushing concentration, and pushing me beyond the thresholds of stress.

My crew learned to speak over my ocean, repeating questions, radio traffic, instruction, and even jokes. When vertigo came, they ignored the dizziness, even covered for me. Kenny

served as the ship's armorer. He learned to recognize my symptoms. He gaged my health whenever I stopped by his gun locker.

"How you feeling, Ma'am?"

"Fine. Need my pistol."

"Right, about your pistol. Gosh, we're running short. Malfunctions. That new SIG is a piece of shit."

"You realize we need a sidearm on the bridge."

"I got your back. I'll serve as Weapons Officer. We'll be fine."

"You'd rather hang on the bridge instead of giving me a gun?"

"No big deal. I can keep you company. We'll have fun."

Kenny and I made fast friends. Weapons Officer became a permanent position on the bridge, at least during my shifts. The arrangement worked out great, but I fell one afternoon while patrolling the decks. I toppled down a steel ladder with an M16 rifle. I had a 20-round magazine in the well, bolt forward, nothing in the chamber, but I asked myself, "What if?"

Tinnitus is not rare, affecting 17 out of every 100 people. Tinnitus is not an illness or a disease, rather a symptom of a larger problem. My tinnitus was like having a hydrophone positioned in the fluids of my inner ear, an underwater warning system that detected serious threats. Debilitating vertigo and migraine headaches lay on the horizon.

The hydrophone whispered, "*Meniere's disease*." Two years' worth of tests ruled out benign positional vertigo, vestibular tympanic dysfunction, diabetes, thyroid issues, multiple sclerosis, and an uncommon tumor called an *acoustic schwannoma*.

I blamed the disease on stress and waited for symptoms to subside, to roll back out with the tide in the same way the sound in my ear first came to me. My inner ocean swelled in the semicircular canal of my left ear. It was only a matter of time before the disease swallowed my career with a roar. A private ocean, a souvenir of sound, leaving only the vibrations of an identity lost before fully found.

I did my best to keep symptoms in check and out of command view. I swam to combat stress, stuck to a low sodium diet, and took medication to reduce the fluid build-up in my inner ear. I avoided all weapons on dizzy days, and made the most of my healthy days. Kenny became my confidante, and I'd like to believe that I became his. He assisted me on and off the bridge and accompanied on my first ride on a nuclear ballistic submarine.

I listened to the duty van crunch over loosely packed gravel as Kenny pulled the vehicle into the Waterfront Restricted Access parking lot. Nerves digested in my stomach. Joy riding on a nuclear submarine scared me. I didn't have to go. I volunteered, probably motivated by gender, the unspoken quest to bust up the boys club, even if only for a day.

Kenny sensed my fear. He navigated lines on my face like a chart. "Suck it up, Ma'am." I tried. The two of us walked to the security gate, flashed badges, tossed bags on a table, and marked time while a team of armed Marines pilfered through our stuff.

A young Marine frisked Kenny. He checked for weapons, explosives, cell phones, cameras, and objects of contraband. He worked methodically, patting limbs, stroking seams, searching pockets, and tracing his fingers along Kenny's neckline, bloused trouser legs, boot tops, and waistband. An older Marine supervised the search, holding a weapon loaded with a

thirty-round banana clip at port arms. His finger extended along the outside of the trigger-housing group.

The young marine spoke to Kenny. “We’re trying to get a female Marine for your lieutenant.”

“Don’t worry about my L.T. Got to be aboard the Nevada in 20 minutes. Trust me, she don’t give a damn.”

The Marine moved toward me to explain the situation. He appeared nervous. My laughter didn’t help. He performed his search, doing what he was ordered. I blushed a little, tucked my blouse back into my pants, and gathered my backpack to move out.

Kenny and I walked down a long dock to where the USS Nevada bobbed and steamed while preparing for her practice drills on the bay. I spied my Coast Guard vessels outside the compound. The familiarity of crisp orange and white provided temporary relief. I relaxed, inhaling the brine of mud flats and salt-saturated wind.

The USS Nevada’s watchman inspected badges, checked his roster, and flipped a half-assed salute, signaling permission to board. We crossed a gangplank, leaving the dock and stepping onto the submarine. I listened as our shiny boots echoed tap dancing rhythms across the blue-black hull. Kenny and I stopped, executed a right face, and popped our salutes to colors snapping in the wind.

I located a hatch and a ladder down. The hatch appeared snug and I worried about getting stuck. Kenny made a smart-assed comment about my fitness regimen or lack of one, so I ordered him to go first. His boots sent echoes up as he descended. I found the rungs with the steel toes of my boots, each step like a bell’s toll, reverberated in my ears. My feet smacked a

deck of solid steel. Relieved. I scanned a large opening connected to two narrow passageways. Disappointed, I noted the familiar interior, almost like my Coast Guard vessel, only more compact. I expected something exotic.

We traveled through a series of narrow passageways, climbing through two scuttles, up a small ladder, and entering another large opening. We found a submariner to escort us to the mess deck.

The mess deck chattered with activity. A centipede of sailors clanged plastic trays and metal utensils. Two long lines loaded up on scrambled eggs, bacon, biscuits, and thick country gravy. Sausage grease and hickory clung in the air. Sailors ate and moved out to assume workstations for the day's operation.

Void of windows, overhead announcements, or connectivity to the outside world, Kenny and I sat at a yellow Formica table decorated with an excellent poker hand, royal flush. Symbols of Las Vegas embellished the mess deck of USS Nevada. I listened for changes in sound, pressed palms flat on the hand of cards and sensed pulses of motion, acoustical energy. Vibrations travelled up through the soles of my boots. The submarine's life moved through shin bones and knee caps. I stood and invited the energy to travel up to my pelvis, wiggle through the spine, gently rattle around in the skull, and ring in my ears.

An escort showed us to the bridge. I spied the periscope, scanned the gauges, admired the choreography of crewmembers weaving in and out from behind equipment, and deciphered the squelched voice coming over the radio. The voice belonged to Coast Guard Lieutenant Martin, my shipmate, serving in my usual position as Patrol Commander. He came through loud and clear. I felt proud one moment and self-conscious the next. I worried about

my transmissions, my radio voice, a female noise, the higher register when I ran the show. I imagined the Nevada crew rolling their eyes as a teenage boy does to a mother's lecture, or how a husband responds to the nagging of a wife.

A soft ping intrigued me. Kenny stayed back while I followed the sound. It led to the sonar room. SONAR, sound navigation and ranging, excited me. I drifted in. Four head-phoned young men sat in a small room filled with screens, gauges, and sound. One stood up, removed his headset and greeted me. He was a striking kid, tall and thin, with dark hair and thick eyebrows. I tried not to stare at his ears. He looked a little like a fruit bat. His ears, red and irritated from the headphones, jutted out from the side of his head, thin, large flaps, almost translucent in light. Complicated twists of red and blue veins formed intersecting rivers draining into the canal. I wondered about the three other sets of covered ears in the room. Did size matter? And was there an appendage requirement for the job of Sonar Technician.

He caught my stare and brushed his ears with his palms. "They come in handy."

"Yes, I suppose they do. You have ears like my sons' ears."

He gushed out information, talked of echolocation and the communication technology shared by whales and submarines, how even with advances in scientific exploration; the whale's system was keener, capable of detecting a copper BB from 500 feet away. He wrapped his headset around my ears and for a moment, I listened to propeller signatures from distant vessels and the faint scratching sounds emitted by marine mammals. The kid explained sonar technology in the way he might explain his job when he's at home, on leave, talking to his mother. I was old enough to be his mother. For the first time that day on the submarine, I belonged.

My joyride on the sub was a career highlight, as were my relationships with Kenny and the rest of the crew. Unfortunately, my days as Patrol Commander ended. The bad days outnumbered the good, and there was no hiding. Meniere's disease forced a new assignment behind a desk while I waited my fate. Stress over the potential loss of my career eroded my immune system. Migraines grew frequent and sleep grew rare. Nightmares and episodic flashes invaded my peace, and I started to drink again.

I sat alone in a biker bar outside the naval base. I wore jeans, flip-flops, and a Bubba-Gump T-shirt. Dark curls swung free from pinned-up braids of an hour ago. Long hair provided an incognito advantage over male comrades. I stashed my combat boots and Coast Guard uniform in the car, safeguarding rank and identity. I slipped into shadows of obscurity.

A man sat a few stools down. He ordered Johnnie Walker on the rocks. *Who? Jimmy Walker? No. He said, "Johnnie." Who the hell is Jimmy?*

Pulse raced. Nostrils flared. I swiveled on the barstool and surveyed for danger. I checked exit routes and sized up dockworkers, sailors, Marines, bikers, local rednecks, Navy wives, and women hoping to become Navy wives.

A wave of cologne crashed down on me – too sweet for a man and too musky for a woman. I choked. Furious. I wanted to blame someone. Someone doused in cheap cologne. The smell faded. Just an olfactory flashback, the Boogie Man's calling card.

I stared into a dirty martini and searched for composure. Adrenal glands pumped venom. I longed for the reckless girl of my youth. I wanted to start a bar fight and fantasized grabbing a stick from the pool table. Ghostly chants of rifle-bayonet drills filled my head. I

selected targets. *Butt stroke. Block. Thrust. Slash.* Heads turned into melons. How many melons could I smash? Rage paced on a short leash.

I eyed bikers, then a table of Marines, and rested on a young sailor wearing dungarees. Dark curly hair trailed from a ballerina bun, work boots scuffed from the day's labor, and a Marine pinned to her body like a service medal. The Marine was more of a Cracker Jack prize than a man. The sailor seemed familiar, like a girl I once knew.

I swallowed the last gulp of martini, ate the olives and ordered another. I gazed into a pool of icy vodka, and allowed the cue stick fantasy to transport me back a couple of decades, back to Army boot camp and Drill Sergeant School.

I rocked on the bar stool, contemplating memories of my first pugil stick fight with a man. He was a baby-faced soldier. Twenty years had gone by, and I remembered the fight but struggled to evoke the sexual encounter that followed. I recalled intimacy and recalled him. Baby-face wore a dark crew-cut and a nervous smile. He stretched out a well-formed body on an olive-drab blanket. Awkward in uniform, all knees and elbows like a boy yet to grow around his bones, but in the nude, he was artistic perfection. His smooth chest provided clean canvas to press experienced skin. I wrapped up in his long limbs to sleep.

Like a gilded butterfly breaking through the blackness of night, romantic interludes sprinkled glitter across the mind's sky. There are too many lost butterflies tucked in numb recesses of memory. These encounters, dreamlike and hazy, sparkle gently and call out for attention. The soft sparks fail full recall. Warm flickers of forgotten intimacy lack the jolt of soul-piercing perfume, sensory-triggers, and ghostly bruising. Flashes of rage oppress sweet entanglements and illuminate only the fights.

I scanned booze bottles behind the bar and stop at Johnnie Walker scotch. Black Label, Red Label, Gold, Green, and Blue... *Blue? Johnnie Walker Blue? Jimmy Walker Blue. Blue. Blue bedspread. Damn.* A slide show of rape created over two-decades ago flashed in my head. Blackened images were illuminated by the call for top shelf whiskey. *Walker, I remember you. Army recruiter, Sergeant Jimmy Walker.*

I ordered a double shot of Grey Goose and drowned him in vodka, but he bobbed to the surface. He flashed often and tugged at the blackness I trapped him in some twenty-five years ago. A Boogie Man like Jimmy Walker never dies. He smolders silently, compounds strength and blazes on a trigger's squeeze. He rides the flash of electric currents back into his victims' lives. Flashes light scenes dulled by time, therapy, and substance abuse. Triggered by the senses, he is everyone, everywhere, at any time. He is perfume in the wind.

The young sailor danced. She was a drunken sailor, singing jukebox karaoke. I tossed a lifesaver disguised as a wink. She caught my drift and straightened her posture. With a heave ho she removed the Marine dangling from her shoulder and hoisted her pants, smoothed wisps of dark curly hair, and glanced down at the name sprawled across her chest. Busted, caught in foolery, drunk in uniform with her identity exposed, her greenness made me smile. Brown eyes studied me for a moment. She approached head on, not from port or starboard, but dead ahead. Bold. She reminded me of someone I used to know.

"Excuse me, Ma'am," she said. "Have we met?"

"No, sugar, but I know you."

"Ma'am?"

She flung an arm over my shoulder and laughed. I supported the weight of her intoxication and closed my tab. She walked me to the door.

“Take care of yourself, kid. The next twenty years will sting.”

“Hold up, ma’am. You headed back to base?”

“No, but I’ll wait here with you on a cab.

Chapter 7: Equilibrium

We met in the parking lot of Pyramid Ale House a few blocks outside the gates of my Coast Guard Base in Seattle. I pondered the surprise date with a man of few surprises. Jim helped me out of my car and once standing, he grinned, tossed a wink, and snapped a salute. I laughed and returned the courtesy. I was a Coast Guard officer, and he was Army enlisted, but the formality was ridiculous when considering our history. In five years as an officer, I received a whopping three salutes from him, all snapped in the same smart-assed way. I think he avoided me in uniform to circumvent the awkwardness of saluting his wife.

He extended an arm out to steady me. He was starting to recognize my good and bad days. When my Meniere's disease flared, vertigo made even the simple task of walking into a bar difficult. Earlier in the week, a military medical board determined the condition was a career killer. The Coast Guard had no use for a dizzy sailor on board. Mandatory retirement loomed leaving me anxious and sad.

We walked arm in arm to the ale house. As always, we drew stares. Either the public display of affection by two military people in uniform, or our physical contrasts attracted attention. Perhaps people stared at me, the one who looked like a drunken sailor steadied by a tall and handsome soldier, but I wasn't drunk. I struggled for something once taken for granted but now lost, life's delicate balance.

The morning's shave lingered on his baby face. Blue eyes faded under a garnet red beret, his presence relaxed in an un-tucked uniform of olive and earth tone bloused over camel suede boots. He was a sight to behold, but I liked him better in the old days, when our lives

matched, when we both wore camouflage, ten years younger, both in the Army, when we first met at the academy in South Carolina.

I looked his opposite. Uptight in monochrome blue, white letters blocked across my chest, uniform shirt tucked, belt snugged, black boots laced, and officer's brass pinned to my cap instead of my old enlisted insignia. Next to him, I appeared short and squatty to his long and lean. The fact we were married surprised people, sometimes even myself.

Once inside the ale house, we held hands across the tall copper-covered bar table. I self-medicated with a double-shot of vodka and the vertigo eased. The room stopped spinning, and the roaring in my left ear softened. I felt safe, seated, and comfortable, but he did not.

He chased ketchup around his plate with garlic fries and spoke out of the side of his mouth about nothing in particular. He did this weird, side-mouth mumble when agitated or nervous, like his mouth refused to cooperate. Only one side would work for him, like an accidental Elvis impersonation. I thought he sounded cool.

He ran low on fries, mustered courage, cleared his throat, and spoke. "We got the Special Forces' recruiting conference coming up."

"You mentioned this a few months ago."

"Only two weeks away now and in San Antonio this year."

"Is this the reason for the lunch date?" *Don't ask me Jim. Please don't ask me to go. I'm no good at this wife stuff.* I took a slug of beer.

"It's just a week. Lots of wives attend."

"Good times, hanging with Army team wives. What's the plan this year?" I asked but didn't care.

“Usual B.S. Training, a picnic, family readiness stuff, and the formal banquet.” He studied my reaction.

“Sounds like a real wrist-slitter.”

“Thought you’d say that.” He spoke to his plate instead of me.

He chased the ketchup and tried again. “San Antonio is real nice. How about the Alamo?” I rolled my eyes. He continued. “Not to mention the River-walk, lots of good restaurants.” I detected part sales pitch, part desperation in his voice.

“Right, me and a bunch of bitchy Army wives stuck in family support classes. Sounds fantastic.”

“C’mon, we’ll have a great time.”

“I’ll pass. Besides, what about the boys?” The kids were a strong alibi.

“Promise not to get pissed off?” He winced as his mouth did the Elvis thing again.

“Pissed about what?”

“I talked to your mom. She’ll cover. She thinks you need the break.”

“Why not take my fucking mother then? You two will have a hoot. You and Mama...”

He cut me off sharper than I expected. “I’m the fucking First Sergeant. The guys from Charley Company are bringing wives. You never go to any of this shit. I’m the guy without his wife. Are you ashamed of me or...?” He trailed off, probably concerned about making a scene.

I lunged at my avocado and sprout sandwich and took another swig of beer. Everything tasted bitter when we argued.

I liked being his wife – or at least as much of what I knew about being a wife. I never fit in with Army wives or any other wives for that matter. My emotional maturity stunted during

my tom-boy days. I was a 13 year-old boy trapped in 40-ish woman's body. Talk about awkward. I acted socially retarded around other wives. I refused to embrace domesticity, hated shopping, practiced poor table manners, and held few lady-like graces. I feared the Army wives. They scared me, especially those highly supportive Special Forces team wives. I pictured a cross between *The Stepford Wives* and Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders knitted together and rallied behind their men. I imagined a platoon of high maintenance busy-bodies with perfect manicures, clipping coupons for the commissary, fundraising for Girl Scouts, sharing meatloaf recipes, babysitting each other's brats, and volunteering at the soup kitchen while wearing stiletto heels. Hell, I couldn't walk in two-inch heels, and I didn't want family support. When my man went away, I ignored the whole damn thing and marched on in my own pair of issued combat boots. I tried to refuse Jim's request, but love always gets the best of me.

I swallowed a bite of sandwich and a hunk of pride. "Fine. I'll request leave and drop my uniform at the cleaners tomorrow.

I expected a smile, but his eyebrows furrowed. "Your uniform?"

"I assumed formal attire."

"I thought you'd wear a dress."

"A dress?"

"Sure, something real fancy. A ball gown and get your hair..."

"You fucking kidding me? What's wrong with a formal uniform? You can hold my sword."

He stammered for the right words. "Well, I just..."

Too tired to fight, I gave up. “Whatever. You want an Army wife? I’ll give you a First Sergeant’s wife.”

He patted my hand. We sat quietly while he ate his burger. I drank my beer and ignored my sandwich. The idea of fussy gowns, panty hose, high-heels, and girdles ruined my appetite.

“Hey Christine, can I ask another favor?” He smiled at me with a boyish grin.

“Now what?”

“You think that just for the conference you might try to behave a little bit better?”

I swallowed the last of my beer. “Fuck no.”

“Yeah, okay. Didn’t think so.”

There were four companies in Jim’s unit: Alpha, Bravo, Charley, and Delta. Each company ranged from around eight to twenty soldiers, and most brought spouses to the Special Forces’ Recruiting conference. There were eight spouses including me in Charley Company.

Jim explained these details in the hotel room on the morning of the conference. He gave me the list of classes to attend, family support and sexual harassment. I grew irritated at the expectation. I sat through the same classes ad nauseam throughout my Coast Guard career.

I jutted out my lower jaw. “I’m not doing this shit.”

He put his hand on my shoulder. “Do it for me. Sit in the back. Play Sudoku all day. Behave, please.” I pulled back, but he gave a gentle push out the door.

We rode the glass elevator down to the lobby and stepped out on the first floor. Seven sets of stiletto heels clicked across the hotel lobby to greet me. These were Charley Company wives. Jim failed to forewarn me that by some crazy flaw in social reasoning, some Army wives sometimes adopted their spouse’s rank and formed a pecking order all their own.

This was creepy stuff. My husband was the leader of Charley Company. The wives of Charley Company soldiers waited for me, the First Sergeant's Wife, their quasi-militant leader. In a perverted twist of marital proxy, I found myself in charge of a high-heeled platoon. We were the wives of Company C dubbed Charley's Angels. I resolved never to leave my room another morning unless armed with two Bloody Mary cocktails, one in hand and one in the gut.

Family readiness class sucked. Spouses and soldiers were split up. Wives went to family readiness class, and soldiers went to training. I sat in the back. I tried Suduko. I found myself critiquing the instructor, picking him apart. I noted all flaws and tried to focus on the topic, but I didn't want to learn about collecting survivor benefits in the event my husband died. I correlated learning to collect survivor benefits with becoming one step closer to eligibility. I refused to allow myself to imagine eligibility, not for classroom purposes, not ever.

I walked out of the conference room and hit the lobby floor. I smiled at the sweet support of clicking little heels behind me. Four fallen Angels broke free to fly, a couple stayed behind, probably intimidated by the Command Sergeant Major's wife in the room. We didn't look back. We hit the River-walk for Bloody Mary time and later toured the Alamo.

We decided to skip classes the next morning together. I visited the concierge for assistance in booking alternate activities, our spa day. I was wrong about these wives. They were not as I imagined. I even liked my new job. I liked being the First Sergeant's Wife.

Several cocktails later, Jim found me in the room. "How long did you last?"

"Not long."

"Did you tell anyone off?"

"Nope, not even close."

“Good girl.” He slapped me a high-five. I liked that I made him happy. I didn’t try to be a difficult bitch, but accepting this role shift, playing student not teacher, the led not the leader, the wife and not the officer, was hard on me. The new me had a lot to get used to in one day.

Jim celebrated the day’s success with an evening of dinner and drinks on the River-walk. We invited my class-skipping, Bloody-Mary drinking accomplices and their husbands. I liked these Angels. I held little in common with them, but still, I liked them.

Marta, blonde, thin, and sophisticated, was God-awful-high-maintenance, but she displayed grander poise than any First-Lady in presidential history. I detected an edge, a bit of a mystery. There seemed to be more to Marta than met the eye. Carley was beautiful – Cover-Girl beautiful. She looked more like a painted China-doll than an actual person. She kept her hair, make-up, and clothes meticulous. I marveled at the effort, wondering how early she woke up to pull the look together. She suffered injury in a car accident a few years ago and used a cane, but somehow this cane served more as prop than a flaw, a testament to her lovely fragility. Sandra was also glamorous and well-mannered. The glamor seemed like an effort, a recently acquired skillset. She liked motorcycles and talked of buying a Harley. Bike-talk beat sharing meatloaf recipes. She was tiny and blond, like Marta and Carley. I stood taller, thicker, and darker, and probably the only one capable of twisting the top off a bottle of beer. But wait, I was the only one who drank beer.

After dinner, we visited Mad Dogs’ Pub, a crazy place where the serving girls wore micro-mini kilts in plaids of red and black, wife beater tank-tops, and black combat boots. Totally my kind of place. We danced and drank, and of course I got a bit carried away. I dirty danced with the chunky brunette cocktail waitress. She had huge-boobies and pulled me into

them. I found this funny as hell. Jim and his soldiers were cracking up, probably wishing they might get away with such a stunt. The Angels stared at me in shock. Their shock fueled the fire. I couldn't stop myself. Angels clung to husbands. They wouldn't play follow-the-leader. I led them astray as far as possible. I crossed a comfort-threshold and was on my own again.

I spent the next morning in the spa and salon. I had my hair done for the formal banquet as Jim first recommended. I wasted the day getting ready, fussing over every detail. The Angels sat next to me under driers and in pedicure chairs. Duties of an Army wife were hard work and expensive.

Stuffed into a silky gown shimmering of warm brown sugar, I teetered on 5-inch Madden heels and posed for a photo with Jim. My feet screamed. I shifted back and forth trying to dislodge the "Body-Shaper," or granny-girdle creeping where nothing should creep. The girdle performed unreasonably well, sucking in at all angles, and creating curves I forgot existed. I'd never forced myself into a girdle before, but I soon learned why some women do. Like a real lady, I presented picture-perfect composure, even though I could not breathe.

The opening of the formal banquet turned out like all military banquets, dull with a side of pomp. I did my best to liven things up, shooting *Grey Goose* vodka with a few of Jim's men. I was living large, a top-shelf kind of girl. I played the First Sergeant's wife.

Dinner tasted bland, mixed veggies, rice pilaf-ish substance, and chicken with a texture reminiscent of presto log drowned in over-salted Béarnaise sauce. The menu matched the usual feed-the-masses meal, but at eighty bucks per couple I made a mental note to bitch later.

The master of ceremonies introduced the guest speaker. As he approached the lectern, a sudden hush fell over the ballroom. Forks and knives clinking against plates ceased. Chairs

stopped scraping the floor. The tinkling sound of ice swishing in water glasses stilled. We stared a moment, shifted a bit, and some put hand to mouth to cover an audible gasp. All seemed to withhold natural reactions, an effort to show no expression, especially not pity. At my table, the soldiers and wives of Charley Company turned to stone.

The guest speaker, a Special Forces Captain, was blind in one eye and missing the other eye. He lost the right side of his face in combat and after several reconstructive surgeries a socket was rebuilt to house a glass eye. From my table in the rear, I quickly discerned the Army needed more practice in the reconstruction field. I thought his surgeons screwed up, didn't get his face right. It was a fleeting notion until I pondered what surgeons had to work with. What does pre-op look like when one loses half of a face? I shook the image out of my mind, deciding a patch would be cooler.

The Captain humbly questioned his presence as the keynote speaker. "I'm the guy not smart enough or fast enough to get the hell out of the way of flying shrapnel." He pulled off an endearing combination of humor and humility. He was genuine, a hero, the real deal. The audience roared with laughter at one moment and fell somber the next. The captain's message seemed simple, one of thanks. Thanks for the little things. Thanks for camaraderie, thanks for family, thanks for tucking children in bed at night, thanks for the next breath, thanks for life.

He worked the room like a master puppeteer and needed no vision to gauge audience reaction. From the back of the room, his body appeared beautiful. I closed my eyes and imagined his face before. He was beautiful, all of him, a handsome Puerto Rican man, young, flirty, macho and suave, probably a terrific dancer, a loving husband, and a kind daddy. A *Mustang Officer* like me, he did his time in the enlisted ranks, struggled through school, and

jumped the fence to join an elite group once reserved for those with pedigrees. He talked about being a drill sergeant. I served as a drill sergeant too. He led his troops through battle. And like me, he suffered a disability. Obviously his disability outdid mine ten-fold. As I listened to his testimony, my *Meniere's disease* seemed child's play.

Our differences jarred me more than our similarities. He laughed at his new shortcomings. I had yet to make light of falling down a flight of stairs or stumbling my way across the docks. He owned his disabilities, rocked them, found a way to use them to his advantage. Blinded with half his beautiful face blown off, he joked about his new career as the poster boy for Disabled American Veterans. He bragged about the opportunity to become the Army's finest paper shredder. "You gotta get me to the shredder, but once there, I'll shred the hell oughta some paper, shred all day long." He pumped his fist in the air. "Nobody shreds faster. Nobody!"

To think I came to the conference bitter after getting pulled off sea duty because of vertigo. Stuck in an office, just like him, my career ended. He remained thankful and proud to serve, even if serving meant to shred papers. He counted blessings and thanked his God to be home, to tuck his kids in bed, to kiss his wife. His body appeared mangled, while mine remained unspoiled. What right did I have to be the bitter one? I wondered what in the hell was wrong with me. I vowed to change.

I failed to realize the waiter delivered cake and only noticed my slice after a tear slid down the frosting. I cried but wasn't exactly sure why. Maybe I cried for the loss of his sight, for the joy behind his courage, for the shame of my bitterness, for my own Coast Guard family and for the loss of a career on the sea.

The other wives in the room sat stoically, legs crossed, hands neatly folded in laps, composed and washing away into the backdrop. Did they understand? I mean truly comprehend the gravity of his words. Did they long for the camaraderie, an unspoken code, a sensation understood only by those who serve?

The cool November air blowing up from the River-walk sobered me. “Easy,” Jim said. He grabbed my arm to steady me as we moved down the hotel steps and to the water’s edge. Countless tiny lights dotted the trees lining the narrow canal they call a river. The river looked like a big ditch. A shallow bottom boat tied to a small wooden dock rocked gently under the weight of unloading passengers. I thought of my boat, the vastness of the ocean, and my crew.

I gazed up at the fabricated night sky, a poor decision. I stumbled, and Jim’s hold tightened to death grip status. “I’m okay, I’m okay.” I reassured him, rubbing my arm.

Jim acted a little tipsy. He’s never been much of a drinking man. I liked this about him. Distress crept across his face. He didn’t know how to handle me these days, my emotions nor my diagnosis. He acted overly attentive, glued to my side, like I might crumble. I wasn’t going to crumble, not then, not ever, but having him near me made life easier.

The crowd flowed around a bend to the river’s end, rippled up one step, and poured into *Mad Dog’s* pub. I wasn’t in the party mood, but if there stood a chance to lift from emotional funk, Mad Dog’s seemed like the place. I spied my waitress from the other night. Jim observed her too and laughed. She flashed a wave, stomped her boots, and tossed a flirty wink. I caught the gesture like a shiny penny and felt my mood brighten. I told Jim that if I ever decide to have a girlfriend I’d get one just like her. He popped a thumb in the air in approval.

The band responded to an Angel's requests for *Crazy Bitch*. The wives went bananas, dancing on the stage. One of them dragged Jim away as he threw up his arms in mock desperation. I let him go. He seemed to enjoy the attention. The Angels were beautiful women.

The Captain, escorted by the Colonel, joined the after-party. They leaned against the bar's rail. Star-struck, I moved in to talk to him, to thank him, to something. I wasn't sure what I wanted to say. I moved close and touched the Captain's arm. Thoughts scrambled. I managed an emotional introduction followed by an uninvited hug. He hugged back. I held him tight, danced to *Crazy Bitch*, and laughed at the irony.

I moved him back to the rail. I could talk, laugh, and relax again. The Captain placed his arm around my waist and cracked jokes, working his way back into character. He slid his hands along my midsection. "Hey girl, I like what I see here."

"Captain, you are free to look at whatever you wish." He was a comrade in need and my hero. He needed to feel me to create a visual. Right? His hands moved freely about my body until he found the roundness of my backside. He let out a satisfied growl. Oh yes, Latino all right, the tell-tale growl, heard it plenty. The sound always gave me warm shivers. I swore the Captain might wear a hole in the back of my gown. I worried about static electricity. I worried about friction burn. I wondered about my façade of tautness. Did he understand the unrelenting spandex of the Body-Shaper held up the chunky butt he fondled? Maybe he realized but didn't care.

I sipped a vodka-seltzer, keeping a lookout for Jim. I imagined he would understand. I'd never describe him as the jealous type, but after a few beers, people change.

"Grrrr," growled the Captain.

Plink. Something hit the brass rail. “Oh my God,” the Captain’s voice swelled with anxiety.

“What’s wrong?” I turned to face him, and vodka churned in my stomach. I pulled a double-take. I had no poker-face. Thankful he could not see me, I struggled to control voice and the gasp that leaked out as I stared into a gaping hole in his skull.

“My eye, my eye fell out. God. Get the Colonel.” Panic filled his voice.

“Hold on, Sir.” I scanned the crowd, but the bar was packed.

“I need my eye.” He held his hand up to cover the hole. He sounded like a lost child.

“Sir, hold on to the rail.” I grabbed both of his hands and moved him into position. He pulled a hand free and covered the vacant socket. I moved his free hand. “Hang tight, Sir. I’ll get your eye. Got to leave but I’ll be right back with your eye.” Like an ass, I shouted instructions at a blind man. I leaned in and kissed his cheek. “You’ll be all right. I promise.”

A wave of calm settled on me, I remained focused, determined, and ready to execute my mission. I dropped to the floor and forgot the expense of my brown-sugar gown. I played soldier again, a soldier weaving through a jungle of legs. I negotiated legs belonging to humans, tables, and chairs. I searched for the artifact that would save my hero. Hands and knees moved over spilled beer and grit. With ass in the air, I searched for an eye but imaged a glass marble, like a cat’s eye shooter. Some legs wouldn’t budge to my prompting. Frustrated, I moved around, lifted pant legs, realizing the eye may be anywhere. I scanned the circumference of table pedestals. People laughed at me, some swatted my butt. I focused on the mission. I worried a kick from an unaware foot would send the eye rolling out the door, down the steps, onto the River-walk, and forever lost into the canal. I rested my head to floor, hair pressed in

the vermin of Mad Dog, all to gain a better vantage point to the underside of the bar concealed by a brass footrest. I moved towards the last table by the door and spied a flat oval next to the pedestal. I crawled, stretched, extended a yoga reach, and finally grabbed hold. The thing stuck to my fingers like hard candy. I pulled the shape close to my face and squinted in the dim light of the bar. I studied the smooth glass before flipping it over. I examined the other side, and the other side examined me. I found his eye, a beautiful flat eye, not a round marble, but a flat one-dimensional eye. I jumped up, stumbled a bit, struggled to regain balance, and rushed to my Captain, my hero still clutching the brass rail.

I calmed myself. "Hey." I brushed his shoulder. "Guess what I found."

"Ah, good girl, my hero." I blushed as he held out his hand. I pressed the glass into his palm.

"Thought it would be round like a marble."

"Nope, a real eye's not round either."

"Interesting. Now, how do we do this?"

"Got to disinfect or risk infection. You locate the Colonel yet?"

I scanned the dance floor for the old man. "No Sir. Too crowded."

"Can you get me to the men's room? I'll use soap." He grew tired of covering his face.

He sounded worn, in need of relief, more than I provided.

I assessed the scene aloud. "Wall-to-wall people. Got to cross the dance floor. Going to be hell. How 'bout I wash it?"

"No." He gripped me. "Don't leave me like..."

"I'm right here." I patted his arm.

I prided myself on battle field-expedience and was shocked it took so long to realize the solution. "Sir, my drink, vodka and seltzer. Way better than a bar of soap."

He smiled at me for the first time since the loss. "Clever Lieutenant, you're my kind of girl."

He opened his palm. I plucked out his eye and plopped it in my drink. Tiny bubbles filled the glass. I thought about my contact lens routine. "Better wash your fingers."

He surrendered his left hand. I dipped his digits, one by one, into my glass.

I fished out his eye and placed it in the pinch of his damp finger tips and thumb.

"Turn away. This part's kind of ugly."

"Sure," I said. I faced him instead. I had no right to be repulsed by his wound, no right to turn away.

The colonel finally approached. We engaged in small talk. No one mentioned the eye.

"You gentlemen must excuse me. I probably ought to save my husband from the Angels." I batted lashes in mock shyness and realized the waste of flirty body language on my Captain. He picked up my signal anyway and squeezed my arm. The squeeze replaced the wink. I squeezed him back. The Colonel remained oblivious.

I fumbled through bodies, groping for Jim, his men, the Angels, anyone familiar. I found Tattooed Goon 1 and Tattooed Goon 2, a couple of Jim's men. "Guys, you see Jim? I got to get the fuck out of here."

I clutched arms and scanned the joint for my husband. The room spun in a mix of drunkenness and vertigo. My body swayed. Knees buckled. I caught Tattoo 1 and Tattoo 2 off guard. We tumbled on the filthy pub floor, but this time I stayed flat on my back with two

Special Forces soldiers crumpled on top of me. Beer spilled on my hair and soaked my dress. In any other scenario, this may have been a potential fantasy nearing actualization, but not right then. I only wanted Jim.

Jim and his buddies carried me back to our room. Jim filled the tub and poured me in. He washed beer from my hair, but the odor lingered.

“Just beer, no big deal,” he said.

“Just beer? You weren’t the one wallowing on the floor.”

“Shit, Christine.” He shook his head. “I’ve pulled you off bar floors before, and you weren’t chasing eyeballs. Now you got an excuse.”

“I tried to behave, to act like a fucking lady.” I tried to cry, but the series of pathetic events made me want to laugh. I squeezed my eyes shut, but no tears rolled.

“You did great, a lady and a hero.”

“Is my dress ruined?”

“Trashed.”

“Damn, that was a pretty dress.”

“It was just a dress, not your uniform. You need to forget about it, get some sleep, and everything will be fine by morning.”

I wanted to believe I’d be fine, that life might be normal in the morning, but my normal needed redefined. Life fluxed to and fro. The new normal was a fight, a constant battle for equilibrium.

Chapter 8: Cease Fire

On December 4, 2009, I retired from the United States Coast Guard. Twenty-four years ended in a quiet shuffle of papers, the snap of a new photograph without the uniform, and the hum of the lamination machine sealing in a new identity. A blue identification card symbolized retirement, no longer active.

I cashed in a few days of vacation, bought a bottle of Sky Vodka at the Exchange, and gifted my combat boots to a single mom on my crew. I delivered the boots with a pointed lecture about the shine. Five years went into building the finish that glowed from the toes of my work boots. I'd never walk in them again, never pair them with the crispness of a starched blue, but still, the boots deserved respect. And this Coastie? A lecture about respect and self-respect would only do her some good, or at least I hoped. She was overwhelmed, unorganized, and barely hanging in there. She resembled a younger me, and I couldn't help but to root for her.

I took the scenic route home, driving Seabeck Highway along the Hood Canal to Lone Rock. The tide was out. Hungry blue herons waited next to beds of oysters for the right time to strike. Bald eagles rested on mud flats, dining on baby eel. The sun setting behind the Olympic Mountains painted an iridescent pink swath across the receding canal. All was serene except my heart thumping offbeat, panicking in my chest.

I pulled the car over to the side of the road, opened the sunroof, and filled my lungs with the briny odors of the bay. Seaweed, mud, and salt – these are the aromas of my life.

Eyes scanned across the water as I searched for my ATON (Aids to Navigation). Think of a buoy with a green flashing light. The green strobe assists boaters traversing the Hood Canal.

The strobe serves as my personal aid to navigating life's challenges. I stop along the water, survey the waves and wild life, focus on the flickering light, and solve the world's problems. I guess you might call it my own brand of meditation.

I focused on the light, feeling my heart slow, and the pain in my chest soften. The iridescent pink cast on the water deepened to purple as the sun slipped lower behind the mountains. I've enjoyed this magic trick numerous times. The glow of the strobe strengthened as the sun's intensity softened. Water lapping the rocks on the shore of the bay blended with the swooshing roar of the ocean in my ear. In that moment, I was one with the waves.

My days as a warrior ended with military retirement, but it wasn't that easy. A blue I.D. card can't flip the switch. Letting go takes time. I had built up a mental armor to protect me. It wasn't impermeable, but with time, practice, and booze, not much got in, and not much got out. Learning to live without my combat boots and armor is not easy. Combat boots defined me. On tough days, I laced them tight and stomped through the frustration and fear.

I cannot move on to life's next mission clad in armor, licking old wounds, and stomping out troubles. My new tasks involve more brain and less brawn, and more sense-making and less alcohol. I work to regain health and find a way back from abuses of power, abusive relationships, and my abusive self. I struggle for equilibrium, meaning, and a sense of peace.

I want to reclaim tomboy days, run fence lines outlining the perimeter of the family farm, and read books in a tree fort. I want the warmth of a piglet swaddled in a bath towel, lying at the foot of my childhood bed, and the simplicity of tossing scratch to chickens in exchange for eggs.

Ready for round two. Retired, furloughed from the rat race, my new favorite uniform consists of flip-flops and thread-bare overalls. Sometimes it's yoga pants and bare feet. I don't even do yoga, at least not yet. I'm armed with paintbrush, water hose, shovel and pitch fork, sculptor's knife, and canning pot. These are my weapons, weapons of mass production.

This is my time to connect with the esthetic self, to make new friends and reconnect with old ones. I will enjoy the freedoms of retirement, the wonders of travel, the stillness of an empty nest, and the conversion of lived experience into sage wisdom. A cease fire is my chance to reconcile and to reclaim parts of a life lost.

My sons finished the new hen house a few months before my retirement. Presented as a belated Mother's day gift, it was built to withstand a hurricane. I don't recall a hurricane touching down in the Northwest, but if one threatens the area, I'm running to the henhouse.

I kept a small flock of hens when my children were younger, when we lived in the millworker's cottage that burned down. Our neighbor was asleep but woke to the wail of smoke alarms. The house burned fast. He saved six hens from the nearby coop while waiting for the rural fire department. He offered to keep the hens until I got back on my feet, found a new house, built a new coop. That never happened. Life never slowed long enough to make time for poultry.

When I was young, my little brother and I tended the family flock. We fed, watered, gathered eggs, and cleaned the coop. We stocked the refrigerator with eggs, sold cartons to neighbors and traded for cookies with Grandma. Egg deliveries to my grandparents almost always included a chicken joke. My grandfather told four chicken jokes, and we listened to them over and over again.

Grandpa told the same joke to every friend who ever visited our farm. “A rooster sits atop a barn facing south and lays an egg. Which way will the egg roll?”

“North?” a friend might answer. Grandpa slapped his knee and performed an exaggerated belly-laugh before explaining that roosters can’t lay eggs, and that roosters weren’t necessary for egg production. My friends typically found the news fascinating, especially conversations about fertilization – Egg fertilization, chicken sex, the rooster’s true function. Grandpa continued with another tried-and-true poultry joke and pulled our young minds away from farm animal reproduction and other adult subject matter.

I filled my hurricane-proof coop with heirloom breeds. I enjoyed the tradition of Rhode Island Reds. I also like Buff Orpingtons – Big, gentle, Creamsicle-colored hens. Buffs are not reliable layers, but they remind me of Grandpa’s corniest chicken joke.

He told the same joke every time a certain biscuit condiment was present at the breakfast table. “What did the baby chick say to the rooster when she found a citrus fruit in the nest box?” I rolled my eyes because that is what you do when you grow up with a grandpa who tells the same jokes over and over again.

Grandma scolded him. “Oh, Irvin, please, not again.”

Grandpa arched black caterpillar eyebrows. “My first wife was prettier than your grandma.” Grandma was Grandpa’s first wife. The mock bantering was for my morning entertainment, so I played along.

“Okay, Grandpa, I give. What did the baby chick say when it found the citrus?”

Grandpa folded a napkin into a triangle and placed it over his bald head and spoke in a voice borrowed from Chicken-Little. “Oh, see what the orange mama-laid.”

The joke was stupid. But I keep a jar of marmalade in the refrigerator and stash single-serve restaurant packets in my purse. Grandpa died twenty-five years ago. My Grandma is in her nineties. She never cared for orange marmalade but keeps a jar in her refrigerator too. I suppose it's easier than keeping chickens.

Tending to a flock of chickens keeps life in perspective. I feed scratch to the hens. The hens produce eggs and poop. The poop feeds my tomato plants. The tomatoes and eggs feed me. Chickens are symbolic of a simpler life, where relationships actually make sense. But sometimes chickens are not enough. I suppose this is why I must make soap.

Old habits die hard, and I slip. Empty wine bottles overflow the recycle bin. Boogie-men from long ago rattle compartments in the mind's closet. I binge. I've tried exercise. Running to escape, singing an upbeat cadence, striking each foot hard on the blacktop, pounding out relief. But every passing car becomes a threat, every dog an attack, and benign-looking houses along the wooded lane haunt. I round a blind corner, anticipate confrontation, scan the ditch for a large rock to wield as a weapon of defense. Fear tightens a strangle-hold on my heart and sends me scampering like a scared rabbit up the gravel driveway and back to the safety of a cognac leather sofa.

I don't let it go long, not anymore. I scour the attic for the speckled canning pot and gather tools of therapy. Gloved and goggled, I weigh eighteen ounces of sodium hydroxide in a Tupperware container. I think about the lye scene in Fight Club and wonder if I could let the caustic crystals burn a kiss into my forearm. I'd like that, a brand of a night tracer.

An opened kitchen window pumps in the frosty January evening. Cold air collides with the steam from chemicals dissolving in a water bath below the sill. I choke but inhale and allow fumes to scar my lungs.

I weigh four pounds of olive oil and four pounds of soy oil and swirl together in the pot on the stove. The timing and temperature are tricky. The lye solution cools while the oils warm. My magic moment of union is one-hundred and ten degrees. Timing is different for every soap maker. It's a game of balance. Too hot and soap turns out hard and unforgiving. Too cold and soap is soft, threatening to disappear within a shower or two.

At one-hundred and ten, I transfer chemical into oil and healing begins. Do-it-yourself psychotherapy, my own version of *Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing* (EMDR), discovered long before a therapist recommended EMDR and long before she diagnosed chronic post-traumatic stress disorder.

I make soap like I drink, in binges spanning the past twelve years. Twenty-eight varieties made in hours of darkness. Over three-hundred pounds in clear plastic totes line the garage walls. Some bars are filled with scrubby botanicals to exfoliate. Others are left smooth and creamy. Each batch is part art project, science experiment, culinary challenge, and escape. Round and round the pot, my eyes follow the stainless whisk. I search for trace, pray for saponification, where oil and water collide, when acid and alkaline neutralize in PH harmony. It is all about balance. Night tracing keeps me sane or at least offers diversion. Cool peppermint waits in a wide-mouth mason jar. The aroma cleans a dirty house. Like freshly fallen snow, my life is blanketed in white.

Life is different now. My boys are almost adults. I have Jim and a new house. Yet traces of the millworker's cottage and my old life remain. Ghost possessions stir. I search for a particular pair of earrings or rifle through drawers for a lavender scarf only to recall items lost in flames. When my youngest needed a bible for youth group, I scanned book shelves for the King James Version given to me by Grandma. I picture her loopy writing on the first page of onion skin, *Happy Easter, Love Grandma & Grandpa*. I see the bible wrapped in a paper grocery sack to keep it safe on the way to and from Sunday school, and imagine the red-leather binding with my tom-boy name "Chris," embossed in gold on the front cover. I stroke worn corners and trace a finger across the gold letters of the kid I used to be.

Doors and windows are latched. Grown boys sleep, and a husband snores. This new house creaks on a slap-together frame and shifting foundation. Coastal winds wail a lonesome lullaby. Douglas fir and Western hemlock cast menacing shadows across my home. Older, wiser, and aware of warning signs, I slip, binge, and dig out a speckled canning pot. I recover, or at least create diversion.

A batch of peppermint soap fails to deliver me. I reload and fall under the spell. A disembodied hand grips a stainless steel whisk. The whisk cuts an emulsion of oils, water, and sodium hydroxide. Pray for saponification. Focus on the whisk's wake. Search for trace, my hypnotic trance. Huff vapors of rosemary oil drifting from a wide-mouthed mason jar. Rosemary, the memory herb, but memory slips. No past and no present. Scalp tingles with delicious zombie-numbness. Slack-jawed, I slurp a string of drool headed for the pot. Meditate. Follow the whisk. Search for trace.

I meditate often these days, trying to reconcile. My mind never strays far from Army recruiting and the fate of Sergeant Swan. Attempting to wrap my hands around that dark period sounds like a waste of time, but it's necessary. I no longer entertain suicidal thoughts, but that success was of my own doing. No thanks to Army mental healthcare. Staying out of that darkness takes practice, and the realization that I can heal myself.

I read the headlines of January 21, 2011, on the official homepage of the United States Army. *Army Completes Recruiter Suicide Investigation*. The Army's investigation included only the four soldiers assigned to the Houston recruiting battalion who took their lives between the years of 2005 and 2008. The inconsistent sprinkling of suicide and suicide attempts throughout the Army recruiting command was not compelling enough to inquire nor dire enough to prevent. The loss of four lives stratified in one battalion raised eyebrows, media eyebrows.

The investigation had nothing to do with the 1998 suicide of Sergeant Swan. It had nothing to do with the murder of Mrs. Swan or the two orphaned children. But I thought of them, especially the kids. The Swan children are teenagers now, close to the ages of my younger sons, eighteen and sixteen. I wonder where they are, and how they have gotten along. I wonder what they understand. But mostly, I wonder what if? What if the Swan kids had been the Wettlaufer boys, as I had imagined years ago? My parents would have raised them in my absence, but would they have grown into the free-thinking, happy, and socially brilliant young men that they are today? I don't think so. Despite bumps along the journey, I evolved into a very good mother.

I wonder about similarities between Swan and the four dead recruiters from Texas. Was it stress or something more? The investigation concluded no single cause for the suicides.

Common factors were command climate, stress, personal matters, and medical issues.

According to the General leading the investigation, none of the soldiers suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). How did he know? PTSD cooks silently. Compartmentalized in a tidy box deep within the mind's closet, it waits for the right moment, the right amount of juice, a surge of energy strong enough to create a flash.

The no-brainer conclusion to the investigation was the need to reduce the Army-wide stigma associated with seeking mental health. I've heard this mantra before. Lip service.

Swan and the four soldiers needed help. They were ticking time bombs, isolated in pain, anxiety and rage. They all desired relief. Did they pace the floor, pray for sleep, or refuse to close eyes and surrender to images the night may bring? Maybe they turned to a bottle, or the gym, or church, or a loved-one, only to reach out and come back empty-handed. Did they check locks on windows and doors, retrace steps, once, twice, all-night?

The U.S. Army Accessions Command prescribed a one-day Army Recruiting stand-down, a stand-down for training. One day when the cogs of the body snatching machine stopped churning long enough to talk about the deaths of four Houston recruiters. One day to learn about suicide prevention, to discuss mental health resources, and combat the stigma of reaching out for help. One day for the lives of four. I doubt I'll ever reconcile this period of life. I'm just not on the same page, and I think that's a good thing.

It's easy to pick scabs, reopen wounds, and compare battle scars. The military provided a lifetime of material. But the truth is that some of my favorite memories played out in the most miserable of conditions. I loved the Coast Guard, but I loved to hate the Army. People say what doesn't kill you only makes you stronger. I think that's total bullshit when it comes to

sexual harassment and abuse. I promise that rape did not make me stronger, or faster, or tougher, or wiser. Rape made me weak. Hope and persistence made me strong. It's a haunting paradox. If I could go back in time and erase the sexual trauma, I'd gladly do it all over again, especially if doing it over bought me more time with the people I loved and respected. My fondest relationships developed in a foxhole or behind a gun.

When life sucks, camaraderie flourishes. I have never been able to replace the relationships I once shared in 1985 with the girls of Alpha-11, my platoon and gun club. Memories of the girls have danced through my mind for twenty-five years.

I sat down at my computer in May of 2010, prepared to write an essay about heirloom tomatoes. I adore heirlooms and cultivate more than fifteen varieties. I imagined tomato passion juicing from fingertips, but the military memory tank was too loud, rattling down the narrow tracks of my mind. I thought about the girls. I imagined their faces, listened to their voices, and sensed them near. I remembered whole conversations, shared secrets, the pranks we pulled, the harassment endured. I ached for that feeling of solidarity shared only between sisters-in-arms. I missed the girls of Alpha-11.

A small handful of girls came alive. Little Rivera perched on the end of my desk, quiet and smiling, just how I remembered her. Connors and Barlo spoke loud and clear, retelling jokes and illuminating the stunts we pulled. I watched Mo and Vegas turn the latrine into a beauty salon, cutting and coloring hair while the rest of the platoon slept. Poronczuk tossed around the c-word, and I didn't flinch. Clobby's Campbell-soup-kid of a face smiled up at me, as did the faces of Janc, Grandma, and Esteez. I thought about Big Mertz and wondered if we could be

friends now. I recalled the cruelty of Drill Sergeant LaVictory and the mentorship of Drill Sergeant Lowry.

Twenty-five years later, I visualized faces as clearly as if I had seen them yesterday. I wondered where they lived, if any still served, and how they survived military life after training. Did they experience abuse and live with attacks of anxiety and flashes of pain? Or did they find a way to escape the dark? I hoped they stayed whole, or at least kept their brightest parts alive.

I scrapped the tomato essay and wrote about the girls. I thought about finding them, but Vegas found me first. She left a note on my Facebook page dated September 3, 2010. *Hi, I think you are the same girl from Ft. McClellan, Alabama boot camp and MP school. I was remembering different people, and your name came into my head. I hope this is you and you remember me too, if not, disregard. If so, how the heck are you?*

Stunned by her timing, I responded. *Damn right, I'm that girl. I remember you. I heard from Mo you joined the Marines... I'm excited you found me. I started writing down some memories. I can see faces perfectly, faces of Rivera, Barlo and Connors, and Mo and you. I'd love to know who else you've dug up. I've been in touch with Clobby. We ran into each other in Grad school. She lives about 30 miles from me, but we never make time for each other. We were not close in training, so it figures. But you and I had some laughs. Tell me about your life.*

Vegas found Connors, the Janc, and Esteez. I found Mo and Clobbie. Clobbie found Barlo and Little Rivera. Little Rivera wasn't on Facebook, but she still served in the Army Reserve. Connors uncovered Rivera's military email, and we sent greetings to Iraq.

It was hard not to believe that through writing, I had willed my platoon back into my life. The reunited handful started a flurry of communications, primarily on Facebook. Rivera

responded to my email, a short note thanking me for remembering her. Mo engaged with the group briefly but dropped off during the first month. Barlo dove in head first, posting pages of obscure details and juicy memories. She dropped off Facebook with an apology. Rekindling old relationships conflicted with her present life and duties as a wife and mother to eleven children. She sent me private correspondence so that we might be in touch in the future. Janc, Vegas, Connors, and I communicate at least once a week. Esteez followed the flow of conversation and popped in once in a while.

We tried to find others, but hit dead ends. Last names changed, girls left home towns, and not everybody wanted to be found. Five of us continued to communicate, pulling up memories from boot camp, retracing histories, and accounting for husbands, kids, lovers, careers, and extra pounds.

Connors completed five years of the military and then went to college. She married a soldier and has three children. She remains connected with the Army through her civilian job.

Clobbie served her initial term and reenlisted. She became the center of attention in a lesbian witch-hunt. The hunt started after she refused the sexual advances of a male superior. “Dude,” she said. “What about gay don’t you understand?” Miffed by rejection, the guy retaliated and won. Clobbie received a misconduct discharge due to her sexual preference.

Esteez finished four years and put her GI Bill to use, earning a master’s degree in Education. She married a cop and had two babies. She teaches in an elementary school close to Washington D.C. She grasps at the slipping straws of her marriage to an unfaithful man.

Vegas transferred to the Marines but received a discharge after developing an eating disorder while trying to remain within weight regulations. She stayed in the law enforcement

field and defeated the eating disorder by running marathons and competing in triathlons. Instead of bingeing and puking, she runs and swims and bikes.

Janc served a couple of terms before working as a body-guard to a stripper. She battled and won drug addiction. She found a steady job and a sugar-mama in Florida. Her latest addiction includes NASCAR and football.

I loved catching up with the girls, learning that each of us carved out a decent life despite the rocky patches. We chatted about sexual harassment and abuse. The girls told me their stories. Each one with the exception of Janc experienced military sexual trauma. The trauma stemmed mostly from abuses of power by those senior. The physical abuse ranged from unwanted groping to rape, usually date rape. Drugs and alcohol were almost always factors.

I finally told the girls about my boogie-man, about post-traumatic stress disorder, and about the rape that happened over Christmas exodus, while we were all still in boot camp.

“Why didn’t you tell me? We were close,” said Connors.

“You should have told us. We could have done something. Ah, but probably not,” said Vegas.

It was a relief to talk, to tell them, to say the word, the word that took nearly a year of therapy to verbalize. I wasn’t strong enough to use the r-word. I didn’t want to own it, to admit I was stupid, vulnerable, and weak enough to be raped. I saw myself as a dumb girl that fell into the trap of a predator. I held the blame and suffered alone. The girls shared their own dumb-girl stories, and each claimed partial blame. I realized that for the past twenty-five years, I never needed to feel alone. I wondered if life would have worked out differently if I had talked, shared the pain with my sisters, and invited them to share. Could we have helped each other

heal? I think so. And the beautiful thing was that we were together again, and it wasn't too late to try.

By October, talks of a reunion sparked. At first it was just talk, lip service to keep the conversation flowing. Vegas mentioned a marathon taking place in New Orleans, and we all pretended that there was nothing more we'd rather do than run a marathon. She shared the website, and even though I hadn't been off the couch since retirement, I signed up. I needed the marathon, and I need the girls. My action compelled action, and before anyone had time to back out, the reunion was on.

Approximately 15,000 runners lined up on February 13, 2011, for the Rock 'n' Roll Mardi Gras Marathon and Half-Marathon in New Orleans. Runners, separated by self-predicted completion times, waited in twenty-two different corrals. The crowd surprised me. I spent a career in the military and ran because I had to. Running was part of my job. I guess you could say that I was once a professional runner. I had no idea that so many people were willing to pay the hundred-dollar registration fee. I wasn't crazy about getting paid to run, and now I was paying to run. It is funny how life works out sometimes. I didn't understand marathon runners and didn't get the attraction, but this was something I needed to do.

I waited in the last corral, corral twenty-two. I estimated more than four hours to complete the half-marathon. Vegas waited in the middle of the pack in corral ten. Optimistic about her first race running below sea level, she predicted a personal best. Connors was AWOL. Scheduled to arrive at the hotel the day prior, she changed plans, brought along her daughter and grandson, and checked into a different hotel. She sent a text message wishing me luck, but we never met up before the race.

Connors and I chatted on the phone and sent text messages for a few months prior to the race. We were getting back in touch. Twenty-five years passed since we last saw each other, but I still thought of her as one of my best friends. We went through so much together during boot camp and had a lot to laugh about. She held my secrets and I held hers. Her voice and that Road Runner giggle had not changed. I can still see her brilliant blue eyes deep set in a peachy canvas and framed by thick lashes and a mass of dark curls. We were both from Oregon and sported physiques suggesting part gymnast, part softball player, and part farm girl.

She pulled a prank toward the end of training. She stole my field jacket, dressed in baby-pink pajama pants, and disguised her face with thick black sunglasses. She ran screaming through the common areas and in and out of the drill sergeant's office with my name splatted across her chest. She was three inches shorter than me, but her dark curls must have looked enough like mine. I learned about her stunt the next morning while I was in the push-up position. Later she explained that she wanted to see if she could pass as me. Great.

I hold an outdated image of Connors. In my mind she is forever nineteen. I scanned her Facebook page for pictures but found only her kids and grandson. She claims to be too fat for a Facebook picture. I told her that we are all fat now. Well, all of us except Vegas are fat. I looked for Connors in my coral and all along the race route. I worried she wasn't ready to meet in person and relive old times.

Clobbie registered for the run but suffered a back injury at work. Clobbie works as a fraud investigator for the state. I teased her about the heavy file she must have hoisted in order to cause such injury. Some things never change. Clobbie hated to run in boot camp. She tried everything to get out of running back then, so it only seems right that she'd suffer an injury two

days before the big race. I couldn't imagine her running for fun. I was just glad she came along for the trip.

Janc wanted to run and lost about sixty pounds before the race. But she was recovering from a bilateral breast lift, a little treat to reward herself for losing weight. Her new body was youthful, maybe even better than the chubby-cheeked, eighteen-year-old Janc I remembered. Her breasts were forever young and her tummy taut. She didn't suffer the body-morphing effects of childbirth. Neither did Clobbie.

Clobbie and Janc were best friends in boot camp. Confirmed rumor had it that they became lovers in MP academy but parted ways after graduation. Each one of them contacted me before the trip. Each expressed anxiety over the potential awkwardness of reuniting. However, once the two were back together, the old friendship bloomed, and it was like they were eighteen again.

Janc and Clobbie arranged to meet us at the finish line, to cheer for Vegas and to carry me back to the hotel. I failed to train, wasn't in marathon condition, and hoped to complete the thirteen miles. It was kind of like rolling off the sofa one morning with the intent to run a marathon. Actually, it was exactly like rolling off the sofa one morning with the intent to run a marathon.

I had time to train, but I just didn't. Bouts of vertigo and depression glued me to the sofa, and the soggy Seattle winter soaked through running shoes and zapped motivation. We made plans back in October, plans to reunite the girls of Alpha-11, run the marathon, and party like we were lowly privates fresh out of basic training.

The marathon idea intrigued me after suffering envy while looking over Vegas' profile pictures on Facebook. I had not seen her in over two decades. I was depressed, fighting vertigo and migraines, and wasting my life away in pajamas on the sofa. She posed in running skirts, hot-pink racing tanks, and coordinated windbreaker and headband combos. Vegas appeared young and fit and weighed about fifty pounds less than me. I wanted her kind of fitness. She assured it was possible. Possible but not probable, and yet there I stood four months later in coral-22, dressed in a running skirt, tennis shoes, a black Rock 'n' Roll race tank, and a sky-blue windbreaker. I dressed the part, even if I planned to walk the whole way.

I wanted to rely on my body again. I allowed my conditions to claim me, and I lost confidence in my personal strength. I needed to roll off the sofa and do something amazing, to prove I still could do something amazing. I looked forward to spending time in Nola and reclaiming a life abandoned some twenty-five years ago. The marathon provided the backdrop, the common ground shared between strangers who were once sisters-in-arms.

We loaded up on carbs the night prior at a restaurant on Bourbon Street. We shared plates of shrimp with grits and forkfuls of linguini in clam sauce. We dove into each other's plates as easily as we had dove into each other's trays in the chow hall. Time had built no barriers. We stuck to wine, a couple of glasses, not wanting to party-out and dehydrate before the big day. I checked my phone for text messages but there was nothing from Connors.

Vegas and I laid out our marathon outfits and pre-race breakfasts. She planned a high-protein energy bar chased with an electrolyte-filled sports drink. I picked up a Diet Coke and a hefty slab of New Orleans King Cake.

In the morning, I picked at purple and green sprinkles glued into the frosted top of the cake. My stomach swirled with performance anxiety. The soda pop failed to calm me.

Vegas instructed on proper application of *Body Glide*, a lubricating roll-on to prevent chaffing, blisters, and hot spots. I thought of my life of raw spots caused by pistol belts and wondered why the military didn't issue such a product. I applied liberally to thighs, along the skirt waist band, to the backs of ankles, underarms, and under boobs.

0733/Corral 22: Jittery, slippery, and ready to rock, I moved along in a sea of turtles, fellow runners of corral twenty-two. The pace slowed as the crowd oozed on to the street, too slow, too comfortable. Jockeying for precious space, I jogged a bit, moved around walkers and shufflers and separated from the crowd. I settled into my version of a powerwalk and moved across the asphalt of Tchoupitoulas Street. I admired the weathered yellow paint peeling free from bricks along the Amelia Cotton Press building. Up ahead a band played *Honky-Tonk Woman*. I held my arms up, reached for the sky, filled lungs with air, and thanked myself for accepting the challenge.

0750/Mile One: I dug around in my windbreaker for power jellybeans. I collected a few sample bags at the race expo the night before. I wasn't sure what a runner ate along the way but figured power jellybeans were a safe bet. The guy demoing the jellybeans cracked me up.

"Excuse me," he said, "do you use energy supplements while you run? He acted all gooey and winky with me, moving in way too close to slut his beans.

"Do I look like a fucking runner?" I stepped back to escape his grape-scented breath.

He gave me the once over, scanned along an ample torso, sized-up a hefty butt, and panned down thick thighs to a pair of cowgirl boots. “Well, honestly... Now that you mention it... No. You look nothing like a runner.”

“There’s your answer. I don’t use energy supplements or run.”

“I just thought... I mean you got the bag and all.” He pointed to the plastic expo bag filled with free swag I received at registration.

“I know. Confusing, this is my first race. Should I eat energy supplements.”

“Absolutely, especially jellybeans laced with electrolytes. Want samples?”

“You bet.” I dropped three packets in the sack and thanked him.

He leaned in close again, getting all sugary, “See you at the post-race beer tent.”

I liked jelly beans, and electrolyte jellybeans tasted almost like regular ones, but kind of sour. I wasn’t convinced the product improved race performance but the beans were easy to carry and convenient to pop in along the route. I avoided purple beans, not a fan of synthetic grape-flavored anything.

0808/Mile Two: My body loosened up. Joints stopped clicking, and thighs slid back and forth, friction free with the assistance of Glide. I passed by a behemoth semi-trailer parked along the route, a green and white rolling advertisement for Nutrilite, Amway’s answer to performance enhancing products. I thought about my bout with Amway, years ago, attending one of those dream-builder meetings and coming out all glassy-eyed and filled with money-earning potential. Friends shot the dream down as I tried to recruit them into the Amway family. I wondered if anyone got rich pushing Amway products.

I powerwalked my way down Louisiana Avenue to the first water corridor and accepted a cup from a race volunteer. I soaked up words of encouragement and appreciated the high-fives and pats on the back. The blacktop, a slippery muddle of spilled water and garbage, created a hazard. Vertigo tweaked gently but remained under control. I slowed a little to ensure footing and balance.

I never imagined the mess of a marathon, an under publicized ugliness. Discarded foil wrappers from energy gel packs, plastic bottles, protein bar wrappers, and white paper cups cluttered the street. Four empty trash cans waited at the end of the drink corridor. I paused and put my cup in a can. One second of wasted time failed to justify the act of littering.

0824/Mile Three: I cruised down Magazine Street and cursed at my walnut-sized bladder. Only three miles completed, and I needed to pee. "Hit the porta-potties early on," Vegas advised the night prior. "The pots get gross deep in the race. You know about *the running shits?*" Vegas told me about the running shits, lectured on the importance of pooping before the start. She warned about how stuff gets stirred up inside a runner's body. She claimed serious competitors don't stop. They shit and keep going. She swore never to poop her pants to save time, but shared close-call stories about diving behind gas stations and construction sites when running shits attacked. She shrugged her shoulders. "Happens to the best of us."

Eight runners stood in front of two porta-potties. I pranced up and down in line, checked the time on my cellphone, and waited my turn. I remembered the vault toilet while on bivouac during basic training, a long building with a plywood platform for sitting and rough-edged holes cut in the platform for depositing one's business. The holes were too close for privacy, too close to sit without touching flesh with another sitter. I couldn't do it in the

daylight, and since then, I've never been good with outhouses or porta-potties. Finally inside, I held my breath and performed a field-expedient hover.

To punish my weak bladder and make up for lost time, I ran the rest of the mile. I slowed only to check out a spooky cemetery and then a dead possum. Death has a way of grabbing my attention.

0842/Mile Four: I settled back into a comfy walk down Prytania and stopped for a photo opportunity with a cheerleading squad dressed up like KISS. The girls played inflatable guitars to a boom box on the sidewalk. Two cheerleaders held up a banner, "U Rock," painted in yellow and red. I sang along to the music, "I wanna rock and roll all night and party every day." I could have stayed with girls and sang every line of every song. I thought about my collection of 8-track tapes stuffed away in a garage cabinet at my parents' house. Love Gun, Destroyer, Alive! I owned them all.

I passed a beat down mattress propped against a power pole. Green and yellow spray paint decorated the torn cover. "RUN LIKE HELL." The upcycled billboard was like some kind of a sign, a personal message created just for me. I realized I was going to have to run like hell to reclaim my life. I stepped it up to a jog.

0858/Mile Five: I hummed along to the KISS tracks in my head until I remembered my iPod. I punched the shuffle button and marched along to Buffalo Soldier. Buffalo soldier has got a perfect marching beat, a reliable cadence to keep time as the left foot strikes the ground. I stretched out a full thirty-inch step, a technique learned in the Army. It's not the same as ordinary walking or marching. The length comes from the swing and snap of a hip. Each hip rolls and pops the leg out in front. An airborne ranger taught me this technique in Drill Sergeant

School. The guy was short, only a bit over five-feet tall, but he moved fast, setting the pace of road marches with taller men. He taught me to do the same.

0914/Mile Six: My lower back ached, and the balls of my feet warmed. I popped a mouth full of jellybeans and distracted myself with the beautiful houses and gardens along the route. I drooled in front of 2702 St. Charles while checking out a Jaguar parked in front of a to-die-for house. I found a tree covered in metallic beads, admired purple and green Mardi Gras decorations adorning front porches and doors, and nodded at a sweet couple pushing a double-wide, burnt-orange stroller. A toddler sat on one side, and his sleeping baby sister occupied the other. The children appeared close to the ages of my own grandchildren and caused a warm pang of maternal energy.

I noted a 10K marker put up along the route. I thought about running 10K races before but never tired. I wasn't sure how many miles were in a 10K. I now understood it was somewhere between six and seven. I felt great. A 10K race was really no big deal.

0931/Mile Seven: The iPod shuffled to Melissa Etheridge's, *Somebody Bring Me Some Water*. I liked the song but only in certain moods. It was one of my angry songs. The lyrics transported me back in time, to the time she first came across the alarm of an old clock radio. I lived in a single-wide trailer with my first husband. We argued about a phone number found in his pants pocket while I did his laundry. He shoved me around a little before taking off to the bar. I went to bed alone and woke up angry to Melissa.

The song pissed me off too much to concentrate. A dull pain in my lower back tightened, and my jaw ached. It was hard to tell if I hurt because I was angry, or if I was angry because I

hurt. I hit the shuffle button and stopped gritting my teeth. Josh Stone sang out, "Cry, cry baby." Melissa took back over with "Take another little piece of my heart."

The iPod pumped out man-hating songs, putting me in an ugly mood. I thought about rotten, cheating men. I thought about Jim, my current husband, and the time he butt dialed me while chatting up some flying cocktail waitress in Atlanta, how he refused to stop lying, how one lie bled into the next. I listened to forty-five minutes of the conversation before his phone died. I tortured myself with his ridiculous lines and lies over and over again.

I screamed into the phone, trying to break into his conversation. He was too deep in his story, about how he liked traveling to Germany during the Oktoberfest, and how he drank a little Hefeweizen every now and again. "Bullshit!" I said. "Hefeweizen is my beer. You didn't even drink beer before you met me. You drank wine coolers, strawberry. You big pussy! You've never been to an Oktoberfest, never been to Germany. Lying son-of-a-bitch." The rant went ignored as Jim crafted a conversation from my life experiences to impress a yappy flight attendant. I suppose I should have felt flattered, flattered he saw pick-up potential in my lived experiences.

Spectators lined the street outside a bar on Saint Charles. Two drunken guys handed out sips of beer and jeered at chunky runners from my corral. "Hey," one of them called out to me. "You're not trying very hard." I didn't reply. The other drunk was trying to talk and jog in place. "Pick it up a lil bit, jus a lil bit. You can do it." The two acted like goofballs, made me laugh, and snapped me out of a hating funk. I swore off Melissa and listened to a band up the street playing a little ZZ Top.

0950/Mile Eight: I stopped off at the porta-potties on Magazine Street despite Vegas' warning to avoid them late race. I was more than half way through the course, but I'd never make another five miles without a pit stop. I opened the door to learn the harsh truths behind the running shits. I checked both pots. Both sported the same late-race condition. I'd hold off; hold forever before I dared another porta-potty.

0910/Mile Nine: I wasn't crazy about being back in the rush of downtown. I liked the quieter neighborhoods. I passed by Hara's and amused myself with people watching. Supporters lined the streets. I enjoyed the costumes worn by runners and spectators, purple and green mesh tutus were popular with both men and women. I compared butt-sizes of the runners in front of me. Corral twenty-two boasted plenty of hefty-ass to study as the miles rolled along. Half-marathon runners/walkers like me came in all shapes and sizes.

I shadowed a woman who reminded me of a school lunch-lady. She was thickly built, wearing long navy sweats, a baggy blue tee-shirt, and a long-cut black polar fleece vest. Her hair hung straight and black, cropped at rounding shoulders. Three Velcro tabs fastened an economy pair of sneakers. She lumbered along at a shopping cart stroll, just another day at Wal-Mart, but I followed her. I noticed her at mile two and moved out to pass. At mile three she pulled out in front again. This went on the whole race. I wasn't looking for a competitor. I scanned women that I thought might be Connors. Lunch Lady was about three inches shorter than me and about my age. Her hair was the right color but not curly, and I couldn't get a good look at her eyes without appearing creepy.

I walked passed Jackson Square, then an outdoor marketplace, and then Café Du Monde. A heavy scent of hot grease and sweet slowed me down. Phantom powdered-sugar

melted on my tongue. The lack of King Cake growled in my stomach hinting a void fillable by beignets. I slid passed a line of hungry patrons, made my way into the cafe kitchen, and stared at fried squares of choux dough dredge in a sugary snow. I thought about tossing the race and diving into a plate of comfort, but I'd already come too far. I dodged a couple of waitresses and took a left turn into a moderately clean bathroom.

1027/Mile Ten: With reluctance and an empty stomach, I reentered the course. The trace of beignet perfumed my hair and invited a return the next morning. It was an invitation I would not refuse. A golden statue depicting Joan of Arc on horseback provided renewed focus. I've always been a Joan fan, a woman too beautiful and brave to survive the boys' club. I contemplated her persecution and death, and took little comfort in her sainthood. Sometimes it is a little too late.

My mother's name is Joan. My mother is strong and brave too, but it took her over fifty years to step outside the rules of her societal upbringing. I'd like to think I served as somewhat of an example. She marveled and fussed over my life, mostly out of fear for my safety and well-being. She worried about me walking the marathon, thinking my balance disorder would cause an injury, but I was doing just fine. Confident enough to finish, I called my fretting mother to report progress.

"Ten miles already? You sound great, kid. How's the head?"

"Not bad. A little vertigo, but nothing much."

"You're not moving fast if you can talk on the phone."

"No. Not fast at all. Taking in the sights and enjoying the walk."

"Be sure to drink a hurricane for me tonight."

“You can bet on it.”

1043/Mile Eleven: I moved through another water corridor and tiptoed my way through the trash. I opted for a cup of orange-flavored Citromax. A man in a red dress handed me a foil pouch of pomegranate energy gel. I pulled off the top and squeezed the gel in my mouth. Disgusting, like sucking a grape-flavored slug. The stuff tasted nothing like pomegranate and everything like children’s liquid Tylenol. The goo clung to the roof of my mouth and swelled faster than I swallowed. Before I exited the corridor, another man in a red dress offered a cup of Citromax. By mile eleven, the novelty of men in red dresses waned.

1100/Mile Twelve: I jogged the next half of a mile hunting for the lunch lady. I wanted to look at her eyes. I would know Connors anywhere by those blue eyes. I assumed I’d lost her during my long pit stop. I turned the last corner with about a quarter mile left before I saw her. She discarded her shopping cart pace and took up an airborne-shuffle. The shuffle seemed a telltale sign. It had to be her. I lengthened my stride, pushing myself as close as I come to a sprint. I narrowed the gap between me and the lunch lady. I ran up to her and gave her a nod. She didn’t respond. I pressed in closer. Connors would recognize me, if this was Connors, and if she wanted to recognize me. She averted her gaze and dropped back. I never got a look at her eyes. Her airborne shuffle slowed to a Wal-Mart crawl. I don’t know if Lunch Lady was Connors, but I do know she didn’t want to know me.

1114/Mile 13.1/Finish Line: Clobbie, Janc, and Vegas cheered as I crossed the line. I donned a participant’s medal, posed for a picture, collected snacks, a cool-down blanket, and energy drinks from race volunteers. Overwhelmed by a sense of accomplishment, I hugged the girls and almost cried. Clobbie and Janc wrapped me in a silver-lined space blanket, and we sat

in the grass. Janc kept saying, “Dang, girl. You did it. You did it.” She seemed as impressed with my body’s performance as I was.

Healthy, sweaty, tired, and whole, I realized the attraction and understood a little more about marathon runners. It was the addictive rush of accomplishment, the thrill of victory over mind and body. I had underestimated myself. I had forgotten that aside from a few minor flaws, my body was a powerful machine, and that I wasn’t too far from the young soldier that Clobbie, Vegas, and Janc once knew some twenty-five years ago. Hope gushed.

I watched the finish line for the lunch lady but never saw her cross. Later that evening I received a text from Connors. *Sorry, I just couldn’t...* I sent one back. *Missed you. I’m here when you’re ready.* I hope that one day she’ll be ready.

Vegas ran a personal best, two hours and three minutes, her first race below sea-level. We shared a day and night filled with first experiences. I ran my first half-marathon and drank my first hurricane. We partied at Pat O’Brien’s for the first time. I stretched out on the bar while a man claiming to be a massage therapist worked my cramping thighs. This should’ve been a first, but it’s probably not. We ducked into a skeezy strip joint, tucked bills into G-strings, and Clobbie financed my first lap dance. We each collected a neck-full of beads and rekindled a lost sisterhood. We behaved like lowly privates released on our first pass from boot camp. We celebrated the first annual marathon and reunion of The Girls of Alpha-11, my first gun club.

Chapter 9: Summer of Reconciliation

The reunion and marathon gave me confidence, and at least for a little while, I stayed off the sofa and out of my agoraphobic funk. I thought about the RUN LIKE HELL mattress when I booked a trip to Europe for the summer. I knew I had to keep moving, keep searching for beauty, continue reconciling and staring down boogie-men, and whenever possible, recycle the good times to level out the bad. Moving thwarted the mental paralysis that stuck me to the sofa.

I hugged the narrow road along the west coast of Iceland in a rented, black Toyota Yaris. With the heater cranked, sunroof opened and back windows cracked, I created enough of an updraft to draw my hair through the opening. Locks of chocolate-cherry floated free and whipped in the wind. I adjusted the rearview mirror, not to pay attention to traffic behind me, but to watch me drive. I do this when I feel alone. Self-soothing but kind of weird, I know.

Side winds blowing off the Faxaflói Bay pushed the car toward the ditch. Sprays of grit and pea gravel peppered the driver's side. I gripped the wheel with both hands, flipped on the hazards, and pulled the car to the side, thinking I had a flat.

After checking the tires, I merged back on the road and turned on the radio, hoping to find a weather station. I don't speak Icelandic and the one station crackling through the air was not in English. New to the language, I don't have much to compare with the sound. It's not like Spanish where you can pick up a few words similar to English and get the gist. Some words sounded similar to German. That didn't help. I don't speak much German. I can order a beer, ask directions to the bathroom or train station, and I can say, "I love you." Stationed at an Army outpost in Germany during the eighties, this seemed like enough.

Icelandic vocabulary escapes from the lips soft and wet, happening near the front of the mouth with long hisses, juicy starts, thick centers, and crisp endings. Unlike German, Icelandic lacks guttural force. Words ripped from the back of the throat in mighty heaves and dry hacks.

I mimicked the radio for a few kilometers, scrutinizing in the mirror as my tongue tangled over deliciously complicated words, words I knew to be names of town. Strandarkirkja, Keflavik, Reykjavik, Seltjarnarnes, Olafsvik, and Stykkisholmur, towns and cities along the west coast line. Perhaps I listened to a weather report or maybe a travel advisory. I had no idea, but was excited to recognize a bit of language from road signs I fumbled with along the route.

Rounding the peninsula of Akranes, two figures tumbled in the wind. I slowed the car from eighty kilometers to a crawling twenty. Two girls weighted with oversized backpacks performed a marionette stumble under the orders of an unseen puppet master. A flag adorned each backpack, one Icelandic, and one redneck. I laughed at the rebel flag, wondering how and why it got here. Here, in beautiful, pristine, unspoiled Iceland.

The girls held thumbs in the air, forming upside down question marks with their hands. "Feeling Brave? Dare you pick up a couple of hitchhikers? What's the worst that could happen?"

I hit the blinker and coasted to the side of the road. I adjusted the rearview mirror to watch the girls celebrate. They threw hands in the air, danced in circles, and skipped toward the car. I breathed a sigh of relief. They were a couple of goofy kids.

As we stuffed backpacks into the hatchback of the Toyota, I studied a large buck knife strapped to the taller girl's leg. Unease crept back in. I'm sure I've seen a horror flick where some lonely, middle aged woman picks up two young hitchhiking girls, only to be bludgeoned

fifty times with a hunting knife and tossed in a ditch while the girls take off with her car, cash, credit cards, passport, cosmetics, and jewelry.

We loaded in the car and introduced ourselves. Buck knife girl called herself, Lauren. She wore a wide smile. “I’m from the great state of Texas.” Her eyes sparked a flaming birch. Her mannerisms reminded me of an awkward, twelve-year old boy. I no longer feared the knife along her side.

Lauren travelled with her pen pal, Gudbjorg, an Icelandic native she met in Italy while the two were high school foreign exchange students. Lauren and Gudbjorg had corresponded for three years before Lauren saved enough money to visit Iceland and fulfill the joint dream of hitchhiking around the island, an island about the same size of Virginia. This was day one of their dreams. Gudbjorg’s mother drove from her southern home near Grindavik, dropping the girls off before Akranes. The two walked an hour before building the courage to pop up their thumbs. I was their first try.

I was thrilled to have an Icelandic native in the car. Iceland was a three-day stopover on my way to Scotland to attend a summer writing retreat. This was day two. I longed for conversation with anyone local. I had questions, wanted proper pronunciations, needed explanations, and food recommendations.

Gudbjorg tried to teach me to pronounce her name correctly. I repeated her drills over and over. Each time, she shook her head and giggled, “No. No. You still don’t got it right.”

She sounded like she said, “Good Bear.” So, for the next few hours, that became her nickname. I kept misplacing Lauren’s name too. She didn’t look like a *Lauren* to me. So, she became *Peanut*, a nickname once used but now outgrown by my second son.

Peanut got down to business. "How far can you take us?"

"How far you going?"

"Well, where you headed?"

"Nowhere, just driving."

Good Bear spoke up. "We hope to make Stykkishomur and take the ferry to Flatey Island."

"Fine. I'll take you to Sticky Marshmallow."

"It's way far," Peanut advised.

"I got nowhere to go."

The girls laughed at this statement, but it was true. I had no plans, no real direction. My goals for the day were simple. I wanted to cruise the open road, find the famous Icelandic horses, spot the sheep dotting the rugged terrain, and enjoy lush farmlands dug out along an unforgiving coastline. The girls and their conversations were unexpected surprises.

I had separated from my two teenaged sons only a couple of days before picking up the hitchhikers. I had not fallen out of the mothering habit yet. With Peanut and Good Bear buckled up and tucked in the back seat like surrogate children, I asked the usual questions, "Everyone comfy? Anyone hungry? Thirsty? Do we need a potty break?" The girls did not seem to mind.

They even took to calling each other the nick names I picked and worked to find a new name for me. Peanut snapped her fingers. "You look like the lady who wrote, *Women Who Run with the Wolves*. Totally mind blowing. Ever read it?"

I laughed at her reference. "Yeah, long time ago."

"It's the hair, love the hair," said Good Bear.

I smoothed my tangled frizz and smiled, deciding not to tell them about the sunroof and review mirror beauty secret. “Forgot my conditioner.”

Peanut snapped her fingers, “What’s that lady’s name.”

I held the answer but didn’t offer up. *Clarissa Pinkola Estes* was not much of a nick name.

With only a few days post summer solstice, Iceland enjoyed over twenty hours of sunlight. Time seemed irrelevant. We drove along ignoring the clock but kept an eye on the gas gauge. Fuel stops were sparse. We munched sheets of dried haddock dunked in a tub of soft butter, an Icelandic staple and the girls’ only means of nutrition for their journey. We stopped at grassy fields to pet stocky horses, fuzzy with a year-around blanket unique to the Icelandic breed.

The paved road ended into a narrow gravel passage crossing over rocky terrain. A craggy mountain range, purpled with Alaskan Lumpina broke through a blanket of misty blue fog. Free range sheep lined the hardscape to absorb heat. Pillars of stacked rock jutted skyward along the route.

“What’s the deal with the rocks?” I asked Good Bear.

Sandy curls and silver barrettes accentuated a roll from her ice-blue eyes. “Tourists, crazy tourists.”

I pulled the car to the side. “Great. Peanut and I are tourists.” Good Bear groaned at the campy gesture. She reminded me of one of my surly sons.

Peanut pumped her fist in the air, an act to annoy Good Bear. “Yeah, stack some freaking rocks.”

We each picked a rock. I put mine down first, Peanut followed, and with more eye rolls Good Bear placed her rock on top. "Make a wish," I said. Peanut grabbed our hands, joining us together. We stood in silence for a moment.

I wished to make peace with my life, to feel healthy and whole and anxiety free, to get my shit together, although I'm not exactly sure what that meant. I imagined Peanut wished Good Bear was a lesbian, and that a romantic relationship might bloom from their friendship. Maybe Good Bear wished to live anywhere more exciting than the family sheep farm in Iceland. She held that familiar expression of a girl dreaming of escape.

It was a poignant moment, with the wind, the sheep, the mountains, the ocean, the purple flowers, and the three of us holding hands next to our rock stack, like some ceremonial proclamation of sisterhood. What did it all mean? Nothing or everything, time will tell.

After our rock bonding, Peanut opened the lid to her mind and dumped out the contents in the car to be sorted. I laughed at the beautiful confusion of her young life. Envious for her freedom, for her lack of mistakes and direction, for the tough and brilliant choices ahead, for the irony of bringing a rebel flag on her journey, I wished to travel back in time, to ditch this rental car, to cinch up a backpack and join the search for self.

Peanut planned to find herself during her trip around Iceland. She hoped to make peace with a decision to join or not join the United States Coast Guard. Impressed by her keen assessment of self and how seriously she viewed the commitment, I listened quietly, inspecting her in my rear view mirror. I couldn't help but to giggle at the contrasts of my own enlistment decision made over a large order of mexi-fries, a soft taco, and TaB. How different life may have been if only I had hitchhiked around Iceland first. Peanut contemplated her patriotic

upbringing, her father who is a Captain in the USCG, the expectation for her to serve, her personal desire to serve, combined with her fear of identity loss and fitting in with her alternative lifestyle.

How did this kid find me? Or did I find her? The Coast Guard is small, smaller than the New York City Police Department. I marveled at the odds of me, recently retired from the Coast Guard, picking up the hitchhiking daughter of a Coast Guard Captain to discuss pros and cons of enlistment as the Icelandic coastline rolled by. I withheld my military status and experiences while we talked about current issues, mainly sexuality and service. This seemed her most pressing topic. She operated under the false assumption gays in the military were rare. Good Bear dozed off despite the rough graveled road. Her curls bobbed in innocent agreement.

Over dinner and a few beers in Stykkisholmur, I talked about my first day in Iceland, how without a map, directions, or GPS device, my internal compass rose pulled me to Iceland's version of a Coast Guard vessel docked in the port of Reykjavik. I surveyed the crew unloading trash from the boat and noted how each one of them reminded me in some way of a member from my old crew.

Traveling a little further up the coast from Reykjavik, I discovered the lighthouse Grotta and a little mineral spring bubbling up through the bay's rocky shore. Someone turned a black boulder, carving a soaking tub perfectly sized for one. I rolled up my jeans and enjoyed the heat and tiny bubbles as Patrick approached. I wasn't sure the boulder was a public attraction or if my bathing constituted a trespass.

Patrick was a tall man in his sixties. He appeared official in olive drab pants, button-up shirt, ankle-high hiking boots and neatly trimmed grey beard. Out of courtesy, I waved,

accidentally inviting him over. Patrick wasn't official. He was French. He spoke little English. I spoke no French. He asked if I spoke German. I went through my list of phrases, ordered a beer, asked directions to the bathroom and the train station, and finished with, *Ich liebe dich*, or I love you.

Patrick got the wrong idea. I find it amazing that after all of life's lessons, I hadn't mastered the art of presenting myself in an uninterested and unavailable manner. I got spooked. I failed the test, the test to conquer an irrational fear of men. Anxiety secured a choke hold, even in a country as pristine and safe as Iceland. The encounter ended awkwardly, with me walking backward to my car, hands out to the front waiving, "No. No. No," and dodging Patrick's wide open hug. I blamed myself.

I shared a few military stories, mostly happy ones and only hinted at the ugliness. We talked about the Coast Guard and the Army and compared perceptions about different branches of service. We discussed heavy topics like gender inequity and harassment. Good Bear listened and drank beer as Peanut asked questions about the GI Bill, duty stations, boot camp and weapons training.

We talked of patriotism. Good Bear claimed ignorance to the notion, but I tested her, tricked her. I fawned over the beauties of her country. I talked about my trip to the Blue Lagoon, how I witnessed nothing more wondrous in my whole life, the warm, milky-blue mineral waters, and the white silt I used as a full-body beauty mask, the breathtaking volcanic landscape, and my deep-tissue massage from Thor. She giggled and blushed with pride. "You see," I said, "that feeling, the fullness, the love you have for amazing Iceland, that's what we are talking about." For a moment, we were all on the same page.

The girls were both twenty-one, legal drinking age in Iceland, yet neither seemed to have much alcohol tolerance or experience. They drank too fast and grew a little too loud. Everything on the table, from the steamed mussels to monkfish was celebrated with a fist bump and an exclamation of, "So fucking awesome." I smiled at their enthusiasm and ordered more food.

Since the rock stacking, Peanut engaged me in nonstop questions, as if I held answers to the world's most challenging dilemmas. I wanted to forget my past, sink into their joy of independence, narrow the age gap, and marvel with them at the wonders of friendship and travel, but I failed to make the transition. I'm not exactly sure why I ended up playing the part of Peanut's sage-for-the-day. The night wore on, and I grew tired, too tired for philosophy, too tired to tackle any more questions. I confessed I knew little about life, had much of my own dramas to sort, but she was certain I had it all together. Difference in perspective, I suppose.

Except for fist bumping moments, Good Bear sat and listened. After her fourth beer, she blurted out her concern. "How can you tell if you're gay?"

Youth, beautiful, ephemeral youth. The girls reminded me of a younger me, of high school pals, of Alpha-11 girls, and of my children. I tried not to smile. "I don't have an answer, Good Bear. I haven't decided on a sexual orientation for myself yet. I try to keep options open. You know, just in case."

Peanut rolled her eyes at me. "You just know," she said.

"Do you?" I said.

"Yeah, look at me." Peanut rubbed her dark crew cut.

"I think you're beautiful, little Peanut," I said.

“Exactly! Chicks dig me, guys don’t,” said Peanut.

“Oh, you let a man’s preference decide your sexuality?” teased Good Bear.

Peanut laughed. “Wait..., shit. No, that doesn’t make sense.”

“No, sure doesn’t,” said Good Bear.

“Girls, don’t worry about all that now. Worry about nothing except catching the morning ferry to Flatly Island. Forget about the Coast Guard, college tuition, Icelandic and US economies, about being Gay or straight, or about growing up in general. Follow the sea around Iceland. The sea has a way of sorting stuff out. Enjoy the adventure. Enjoy your friendship and your freedom while you are young.”

“Salthjarta,” said Good Bear. “Your nickname, Salt-heart. You follow the sea.”

“I love my new name,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Skal,” said Good Bear. We repeated the toast and clinked glasses.

I drove them around the village of Stykkisholmur until I found a campsite protected from the wind. I fussed over their gear and worried about the cold wind. I offered to pay for a hostel, warm beds and a locking door. I fretted over their safety. Good Bear attested to Iceland’s low crime rate. Peanut patted the knife strapped to the side of her leg. “I’m all the protection we need.” I admired her confidence and bravery. She made me long for a time when I had no reason to fear.

I had a hard time letting them go, or perhaps I had a hard time going alone. They sensed the hesitation and asked me to stay, stay with them in a two-person backpacking tent, assuring that it would be roomy enough, warm enough, safe enough. Crazy, but I considered.

I thought about my noon flight to London, how only one flight left for London per day. London was the next stopover on my way to Scotland. I wanted to stay, stay and continue on with the girls to Flatly Island, stay and find myself in the company of Peanut and Good Bear. But the time for such things had passed. They had their own lives to find, and I had mine to reconcile and recreate.

Suddenly too cognizant of time, I had thirteen hours until boarding. I'd spent about twelve hours with the girls. I needed an endless cup of coffee and a full tank of gas to make the trip back down the coast, return the rental car, check out of my hotel and get to the airport. I cut the time too close, but often do.

We hugged goodbye, promised to find each other on Facebook, and I studied the girls in my rearview mirror as they fought the wind while setting up a tent for the night. I drove slowly. The girls turned into little dots, disappearing once I pulled in to fuel up the car.

The night left a bittersweet sensation. I smiled at the chance of my Iceland adventure colliding with theirs. Thankful for youth's company, endeared by the sisterhood of travelling companions, and delighted to have a day with an Icelandic native, an opportunity to ask my tourist questions, to learn more about this amazing land, I wanted time to stand still. The economy rental car seemed gigantic, and the back seat was a dark cave.

I adjusted the rearview mirror, not to pay attention to traffic behind me, but to watch me drive. I do this when I feel alone. I stared at me, Salthhjarta the sage. The woman at peace with her life and the woman with her shit together. I still wasn't exactly sure what it meant to have my shit together, but even still, I felt lucky.

I cranked the heater, opened the sunroof, and cracked the back windows just enough to create an updraft. I pulled away from the gas station. As I picked up speed, locks of chocolate-cherry floated free and whipped in the wind.

After my far-too-brief visit to Iceland, I spent a few days kicking around London, before checking into a writers' residency in Edinburgh, Scotland. I spent the month writing about my military career. Writing helped. Things were starting to make a little more sense. But as the end of my time drew near, I wasn't ready to head home. I knew where I needed to go next.

I swore never to return to Germany, never return to Kriegsfeld Army Depot. I lied. The lie was more of a last minute decision than a calculated deception. I booked the ticket in late July, during my final week in Scotland. I tried writing about my time at the depot, thinking the practice would prove therapeutic or provide answers, some relief, and a way back from anxiety attacks, agoraphobia, and the rest of the crap that goes along with post-traumatic stress disorder.

I failed to articulate clear reasons to go, but I somehow knew I needed to. I thought Jim would pitch a fit, wanting me home to take back the responsibilities of the greenhouse, the chicken coop, the dog, and the boys. But he seemed to understand the need better than I did.

Part of me justified that a personal visit might provide closure. But part of me wanted to pull bandages off old wounds and bleed all over the place. Sounds creepy, I know.

More than two decades deadened recollections. Time numbs. I lost the passionate hate and questioned the veracity of recalled memories. Was life in Germany all that miserable? I hold a penchant for the dramatic and admit a tendency to exaggerate. Perhaps I only imaged the horrible things, dreamlike flashes of assault and attempted rape, date rape, and the

constant flood of harassment. A make-belief life, incomplete, hollowed by missing chunks of data, memories blackened by time, a phantom experience bubbling around in the soup of a neurotic mind, I wondered.

Fact or fantasy, enough material to blow the world apart passed through Kriegsfeld Army Depot, several times over. I served my first Army tour at the depot in 1985, guarding the front gate, standing watch in towers, and counting down the days until I transferred out of that hell-hole.

The depot originally belonged to the German Wehrmacht. Built in the late 1930's, the place served as an ammunition supply point until the end of WWII. The US Army took over, and by 1957, nuclear warheads arrived. One section of the post was typical of most remote Army locations. There were barracks, a mess-hall, an enlisted club, a gymnasium, some administration buildings, a small store, a poorly staffed education center, and a three-lane bowling alley that rarely opened. The other section, the weapons facility, was unique. Tucked on a hill and behind a double-fenced perimeter rested bunkers filled with weapons of mass destruction. Overlooking the bunkers were towers. A concrete structure, Tower One, served as the Site Security Control Center. Seven steel structures with bullet proof glass dotted the perimeter.

More than 2,000 military police cycled in and out of Kriegsfeld. They worked around the clock, providing complete and continuous security for the post and for the perimeter encircling the weapons portion. MPs were additionally tasked to provide security for convoy movement of nuclear material processed through the depot. Attempts to keep MPs in the dark failed. We

were never told exactly what we were guarding, but rumors circulated, information moved, and legends were born.

I stood in line waiting to clear customs in Munich, Germany. I fumbled with my passport, unsure of what I would tell the agent. I wasn't there to visit anyone, didn't have hotel reservations or return ticket.

A textbook Aryan customs agent with blue eyes and spiked straw hair inspected my documents. "How long do you plan to stay?"

"Couple of days, possibly three."

"Why so short? You can't visit the country in three days."

"I've been here before, was stationed up north years ago."

"Is that where you are going?"

"Yes, Kriegsfeld Army Depot, up by Kaiserslautern."

"Kriegsfeld? Never heard of this place."

"You're probably too young. Cold War era nuke site. Closed in ninety-two."

"You are here to visit an abandoned munitions site?"

"Yes. That's correct."

"I hope you take time to visit more than a closed Army base."

"I will."

He stamped my passport. "Welcome back."

Welcome back? I thanked the agent and headed out. The weight of his voice pressed down on my shoulders. He was a good-looking man, but his accent and fair features made me nauseous. I bolted into the ladies room and splashed water on my face. I understood the panic,

the anxiety of coming back. I examined my reflection in the mirror and gave a patient nod. Come on, girl. You got this. Get your shit together. I practiced deep inhalations, in and out, three times. Good to go.

I floated in a sea of language. I caught quips of English and a little French mixed up in the drowning guttural force of native tongue. Due to the impromptu nature of the trip, I hadn't studied up on German. Of course, I remembered how to ask for directions to the train, how to order a beer, and how to say *Ich liebe dich* or "I love you." Some phrases were far too valuable to forget.

I followed the symbol of a little black car above the word *Mietwagen*. Mietwagen made me laugh, like meat-wagon. What a horrible translation for rental car. I found my way from the rental desk to the garage and then to my mietwagon, a gunmetal grey economy model with a lightning bolt emblem. I was unfamiliar with the make, but found the tiny size perfect to accommodate the occasional agoraphobic funk. I felt safe in cars, secured from the world, wrapped in a protective bubble of glass and steel. I loved to drive with the sunroof open, a porthole to the atmosphere I controlled with the push of a single button. I tried to request a rental with sunroof, but my miming skills failed.

I rented a Tom-Tom, a GPS device with an English option. I scrolled through the voice selections, contemplating the personalities of Richard from England, Ken from Australia, Mandy from Scotland, and Laurie from the United States. I've never enjoyed taking directions from a man, so Richard and Ken were out. Laurie sounded too bossy and too common. I'd grown accustom to the polite lilt of the Scottish accent and selected Mandy to accompany me on the adventure.

Mandy helped me navigate the twisting mess of Munich airport and find my way to the autobahn. I wasn't crazy about Germany, but I loved the autobahn. What's not to love, especially for the American driver? A multilane roadway, long stretches of smooth surface with no speed limits, and blue and white arrow-shaped signs with the word, *ausfahrt*. My inner thirteen-year-old never grew tired of the German word for exit.

The concept of the autobahn was conceived pre-WWII, during the Weimar republic. Economic instability and lack of political backing depressed construction and progress halted. Adolf Hitler picked up the ball days after the Nazi takeover in 1933. He championed the cause by employing over 100,000 workers and spurring economic recovery. Autobahn construction strengthened regime approval, and provided a fast track to move propaganda. I never understood how Hitler rose to such power. The rise is easier to imagine behind the wheel. Money, fast cars, and fast talk equaled popularity.

Rudolf Caracciola set the world record for speed along the stretch between Frankfurt and Darmstadt during the late thirties. His record of 432 kilometers per hour or 268 miles per hour remains one of the fastest times recorded on a public motorway. I stuck it to the floor, and the lightning bolt shook at 150 Ks. I dogged out the engine, dropped back, and then eased her up. I passed 150 and held steady to 180. I remembered the math: $(Ks \times 5)/8 = MPH$. It wasn't exact, but driving over 112 mph seemed fast enough. I drive under the speed limit at home. I'm the annoying woman poking along the back roads, checking out unique mailboxes, gardens, and slowing down for wildlife, pets, and children on bicycles. I grabbed my cellphone and snapped a picture of the dash to prove I once broke 100 mph. That's the only real bummer about touring alone. No one is there to back up your story.

I travelled along the autobahn, listening to the radio, a collage of popular English disco, a few favorites from the eighties, a little techno, and commercials and announcements spoken in German. I planned to drive all the way to Kirchheimbolanden, approximately five hours from Munich and the closest town near Kriegsfeld. I read a tourism sign indicating the exit for Dachau. I didn't stop.

Hitler opened Dachau in 1933, about a month after reestablishing the autobahn project. Constructed on the site of an abandoned munitions factory, Dachau claimed fame to over 30,000 recorded deaths. The exit sign reminded me of a childhood prayer. "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the lord my soul to keep." And then I remembered the *Dachau jingle* delivered in the same rhythm. "*Lieber Gott, mach mich dumm, damit ich nicht nach Dachau kumm.*" The English translation drops a syllable and clips the rhythm in the first line. "Dear Lord, make me dumb, that I may not to Dachau come.

I tried to visit Dachau in the eighties while stationed in Germany, but I just couldn't. I signed up for a tour organized by the Army's Morale, Welfare, and Recreation office. I sat on the bus for a five-hour ride listening to the guide detail the grisly account of Dachau. The guide sang the Dachau jingle. I recited the German words until the phrase transferred into long term-memory. When the bus arrived at the entrance, I couldn't get out. I didn't want to see the slaughter houses, the medical experimentation barracks, or the crematorium where detainees burnt the bodies of their fellows. I couldn't handle the historical horror in my state of depression. I still can't.

I made a pit stop after Kaiserslautern to refuel, rest up a little, and grab something to eat. I forgot how much I loved brochen and lanjagger, a hard bread roll and dried sausage combination. I stocked up, purchasing two extra for the journey.

I almost didn't recognize Kirchheimbolanden. Twenty-five years change a town. The quaint village and narrow cobblestone streets, neighborhood shops, crumbling old churches, and perfect little gardens were swallowed up in the belly of suburbia complete with a new McDonalds. I drove by modern buildings and unfamiliar stores until I found the heart of old town. I located the abandoned train station and then the old guest house where I stayed in 1985 with my boyfriend and first ex-husband, Steve. The Hotel Nagel, built hundreds of years ago, was owned and operated by Wolfgang. I thought I remembered Wolfgang, but I was probably trying too hard to find a familiar face.

I bought a room for the night, and Wolfgang carried my suitcase up three flights of dark wood stairs. Wallpaper yellowed and peeled away from crown molding and the stairwell held a musty bouquet, like fanning the pages of an old book. He worked the lock with a skeleton key, opening up to renovated room dotted with Ikea furniture and lime green curtains. Stepping in my room was a disappointing jump into another century.

"Like?" Wolfgang nodded his head with pride.

"Ja, danke."

"Gut?"

"Ja, good. Perfect."

He held an invisible glass to his lips. "Bier. Wein."

"Ja bitte. Bier, bitte. I'd like that a lot."

Wolfgang shrugged his shoulders and tugged lightly at my jacket to motion me downstairs. I followed him into his tap room. He grabbed a pottery stein, off white with a blue Lowenbrau lion and waved his hand in front the taps. I wasn't familiar with the brands but ordered an old favorite. "Hefeweizen, bitte?"

"Ja. Ja. Gut. Hefeweizen." He sounded happy I knew at least one German beer.

I sat across from him in the bar. We sipped beer and tried to communicate. He responded to most of my questions with a couple of shoulder shrugs and a smile. I wondered about Frau Wolfgang, or if he had a frau. Maybe she slept in the private quarters, the modern addition attached to the side of the hotel. I wondered if I was the lone patron, just me and Wolfgang for the night.

Conversation failed, and he turned on an old television mounted in the corner beneath the huge head of a taxidermy wild boar. Mounted heads of glassy-eyed deer gathered dust and cobwebs. The boar's head seemed foreboding, gnashing teeth and snarling snout. The boar made me edgy. My imagination crept out of control.

The taxidermy and the aloneness with Wolfgang reminded me of the scary movie, *Psycho*. It's difficult to explain, but scary movies stay in my head. Fantasy crosses over into reality. Sparks of photo-perfect scenes ignite panic and irrational behavior. I blame it on the PTSD. I didn't use to be this way. I can't forget. Images of Norman and the Bates Motel flashed in my mind. I tipped the mug, and tried to wash down mounting anxiety. I planned to sleep fully clothed, forgo a shower and stack Ikea furniture against the door.

Wolfgang held a pretend cigarette to his lips motioning me outside to have a smoke. I don't smoke, but followed him into a patio garden. Finally, we communicated. I admired his

grapefruit and lemon trees, amazed at how he grew such healthy specimens in the damp Kirchheimbolanden climate. He pulled me by the arm. He showed me shrubs, trees, and bushes and rattled away in German. Language no longer mattered. We talked about his pineapple plant, and how he started with a discarded stem of a store bought pineapple. How after three years of carrying the heavy pot inside for winter and outside in the spring, it bore fruit. He pointed at a tiny pineapple the size of a baby's hand. I patted his back to congratulate such accomplishment.

I drank another beer, and then a third. We finished the evening with elderberry liqueur sipped from crystal glasses. The delicate glass weighed nothing in my hand after slugging from a beer stein. I turned the stem to catch prisms of light from edelweiss flowers etched in the frosted bell. The liqueur moved down my throat like cough syrup, warming my chest and relaxing my shoulders. My teeth wore fuzzy sweaters of sugar sweet. I needed my toothbrush. I needed to sleep.

I pushed the furniture in front of the door like originally planned. The act made me feel like an ass. I did it anyway to appease the hyper vigilant part of me that refused to let the past die. In the morning, Wolfgang laid out breakfast. He served hot coffee, fresh brochen with hard and soft cheeses and sliced meats. I forgot how much I loved German breakfast. Wolfgang sat across from me at the breakfast table. He wanted me to stay another night and pushed the key across the table. "Eine Nacht?"

I shook my head and pushed the key back. "Nein, danke." He crossed his arms and made a pouty-face. I wanted to speak better German. I made a new friend, a sweet old man, but I was

unable explain where I was going and why. I lacked words to say I was sorry to leave. I forgot how much I loved German people.

I didn't have an actual address for the depot. I figured I'd remember how to get there once I drove into Kirchheimbolanden. I drove out of the old town. Nothing seemed familiar, and Mandy helped little.

I talked to a teenage girl working at the McDonalds. She spoke English but had no clue where I needed to go. She asked coworkers but struck out. She called her mother but still no luck. Then she contacted her grandma and jotted directions on an empty fry sack. The grandma thing stung a little. It was hard to believe a quarter of a century passed, that I had aged a quarter of a century.

I followed the directions, and thought Grandma must be right as I paralleled long lines of rusted mesh fencing topped with razor wire. The directions brought me to a front gate, but not the gate I remembered. The gate was modern, and the site appeared active. I got out of the car and stared through the wire. Nothing but the long lines of fence seemed familiar. This wasn't the place.

A small silver car on the other side of the fence moved toward me. As the car passed through the gate, I waved for help. A blonde woman in the passenger seat rolled down her window. My deer-in-the-headlights gaze must have given me away. She spoke English, asking if I needed directions. I told her what I was trying to find. We appeared similar in age. I remained hopeful. She spoke German to the driver while I checked out red and yellow flames tattooed up his forearms.

My heart plunged after she pointed to the right turn a few hundred feet behind me. The road led straight to the depot. How could I have overshot that road? Dumbstruck, I was no longer sure I wanted to find the correct gate. The woman asked if I needed additional help. I apologized and thanked her and the driver, both in English and German. She nodded and gave a sympathetic smile before wishing me luck. We shared an unusually warm but awkward exchange over basic directions.

I pulled up to the front gate and opened the car door. A fawn stuck his head out of the woods and took a few steps in my direction. I moved toward the old guard shack and gazed through the fence. A wave of images, clear and real, crashed down on me. I stared through the wires and bawled. I had not forgotten how much I hated Kriegsfeld Army Depot.

I hated this place. I hated remembering my failures and vulnerabilities, the gullible mistakes, the alcohol and drug abuse, the harassment and assaults, the humiliating loneliness of getting knocked-up, and the failed quest to find a man to make it all better. I hated the crush of innocence and hated the stomp of combat boots on a young girl's soul. This was the place I learned true shame, a gaping wound that won't heal. Where I lost all self-respect and tried to destroy myself with booze and reckless behavior. This is where I first contemplated suicide and wanted to die. But this was also where I contemplated motherhood and decided to live.

The silver car pulled up alongside me, and the blonde woman leaned out.

"You all right?"

I wiped my eyes and nodded, "Yes. No. Not really."

"You have memories?"

"Ugly memories."

"Your husband worked here?"

"No, I did, a long time ago."

"Terrible place. I married an American soldier from here. It didn't work."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not. He was an ass."

"That's funny. I married an ass from here too."

"You see? Bad place, full of asses. What's your name?"

"Christine. What's yours?"

"Silka."

"Thanks for checking up on me, Silka."

"You seemed sad back at the other gate. You going to be all right?"

"I'm a wreck, but I'll be fine. This place made me sad for a very long time."

"It made everyone sad."

I didn't stay long after the silver car drove away, maybe twenty minutes. I recognized a few of the old buildings. The female barracks was missing. Dandelions and tall grass filled the space where I remembered sleeping. I thought about my first night, about Tucker and my introduction to sexual harassment on the hill. I thought about how I had beaten him bloody with a nightstick, and the image made me smile. I was glad the building was gone, glad the site was closed, and glad bunkers once filled with nuclear war-heads were emptied and abandoned. The towers no longer loomed over the site. Instead, giant white arms of windmills turned in the breeze.

The windmills were beautiful, symbolic of peaceful times, or at least the thaw of the Cold War. Kriegsfeld Army Depot was dead. Wounded by negotiations, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the reunification of Germany, the disintegrating USSR, and the dissolve of the Warsaw Pact, but the depot took the final kill-shot from the *Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Reduction Treaty (INF)*. This treaty, in tandem with Presidential Order, required the removal of all US owned nukes from Europe by 1992. Kriegsfeld was killed by change.

I drove away from the site but stopped before hitting the main road. Unfit to drive, I practiced breathing to regain composure. I meditated on what I believed to be the most spectacular mushroom in the world. Mushroom awe temporarily replaced sadness. I measured the cap with the spread of my left hand but came up short about two inches all the way around. I grabbed my McDonalds coffee cup to use as a photo reference. With cup and stem aligned, I snapped a picture with my cell phone. The large cup measured a third of the stem. Germans don't do the American version of large, but still, the comparison was impressive. My feet posed for a photo. Purple toenails wiggled underneath an umbrella of spores.

The damp forest floor seeped through my skirt. A prickly hedgehog scuttled across the road. Lush foliage and fauna made me giddy, a little crazy, happy and sad all in the same moment. My senses were on fire. I felt warm and alive huffing in the earthy aroma. I realized that the part of me that obsessed over mushrooms and nature had not died. Despite some dark days as a warrior, I had not lost my light. I was still that farm kid from Oregon, running fence lines and feeling the soil squish between my toes. I still owned what I owned back then, the possessions of love, hope, wanderlust, and a belief that change was possible.

I gazed above the tree line of pines and Douglas fir at the angelic wings of wind turbines. Kriegsfeld was undergoing reclamation. Mother Nature picked away at her ugly scab. Wildflowers busted up through asphalt. Weeds and rust gnawed at buildings. The land found new identity, a shift from the destructive forces of war to the power of renewable energy, a repurpose. I had peered through the main gate and witnessed this reconciliation with nature, a healing process a long time coming. If there is hope for an abandoned nuke site, there must be hope for me too.

VITA

The author was born in Oregon City, Oregon. Her career in the United States Army, Army Reserves, and United States Coast Guard spans three decades. She earned a Bachelor's degree in general studies from Regents College, a Master's degree in organizational leadership from Chapman University, and a Ph.D in Management from Walden University. She joined the University of New Orleans creative writing program in 2009 to pursue a M.F.A. She is mother and stepmother of five sons, a grandmother of two, a wife, an avid gardener, potter, and blooming nature junky.